

FEAST OF CONSECRATION 2010 and DEDICATION OF THE RESTORED CATHEDRAL BARN

Years ago I heard of a Nonconformist chapel where everyone was 'brother' this or 'sister' that, and in a burst of affection the minister called the piano 'our wooden brother' as he worked them all up to sing a hymn. Today is a day for giving thanks for this great cathedral church, and showing affection for 'our stone mother'. The stream of faith has flowed through this place in many different ways over the centuries: the things people thought mattered, the ways they prayed and sang, the clothes they wore, the way they spoke, the look and the use of various parts of the building – everything has changed again and again and again, but it has all been under the sheltering wing of this church. Ours is a religion of incarnation, of God entering the world and being found in the world: Emmanuel, God with us. And so we don't shy away from material and earthy things in our worship, but we use water, bread, wine, oil, the laying-on of hands, the kiss of peace, robes, colour, incense, art... and buildings. Yes, the Body of Christ is people, the Church is people, but people need places and those places become dear to us. This place is dear to us, and we thank God for that.

However different those of ancient times were from us, we know that we are one with them here; as a hymn puts it: 'These stones that have echoed their praises are holy, and dear is the ground where their feet have once trod, yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims, and still they were seeking the City of God.' We are one with them not simply because we pray and worship in the same building, but because we too are 'strangers and pilgrims' still 'seeking the City of God'.

I'm always encouraged to know that at most times of human history there has been uncertainty and misunderstanding about issues of faith and religion; it isn't something peculiar to our day and age. If Victorians were worrying about fossils having been discovered or Moses not having written the first five books of the Old Testament, their grandparents were wrestling over Deism; and those people had grandparents who couldn't sleep because of the question of whether or not bishops were needed, and their grandparents had had to decide who was right as the Reformation swept the country. There has never been a Golden Age of faith when everything was serene and stable. We've got our troubles over organization and money and sexuality and post-modernism, but those before us had their own painful troubles too. We're not living in uniquely perplexing times. Like us they were 'strangers and pilgrims' and not comfortable residents arrived and established in the City of God. They struggled, and we struggle. What fears have been prayed about here, what tears shed, what doubts wrestled with, we can only imagine. Yet they all persevered with the journey, and the long continuance of this house of prayer is a sign of that faithful perseverance.

But in the very shadow of this cathedral there stands a much humbler building. Today we call it a barn, although it's clear that once it had a grander role as a domestic aisled hall. Yet it fell on hard times and after service as a grain store wasn't ashamed to become a coach house and stable. For all the grandeur of the cathedral a stable is perhaps closer to the heart of God because we read that Christ was born in one, and only later taken to the

Temple – the Temple with which he had a rather strained relationship, as the gospel reading reminded us. Today may be our Feast of Consecration, which honours the cathedral, but, appropriately, it's also Rogation Sunday, a day for blessing the growing fields and praying for a good harvest, which rather nods towards the barn. And honour the barn we do, in a different way today, as it enters a new phase of its life as an educational resource.

If the worship and style of the cathedral has altered over the years, so has the kind of work it has undertaken. Today we have a growing ministry in the provision of educational opportunities for visiting school groups. And if there are those who see that as unnecessary icing on the cake I would say that, increasingly, it must become an important ingredient of the cake itself. As more and more people understand less and less about the Christian faith we have to build bridges of welcome and hospitality, of teaching and of engagement, so that people can learn about our worship and faith and life.

Let me tell you a couple of stories. I was walking to Evensong last Thursday, the bell ringing out over the Close. From the distance, where a group of youths were sitting, a voice shouted out 'There's no such thing as God,' and when I failed to rise to the bait and carried on towards the cathedral, 'You're in denial'. Alright, it was a bit of bravado from a safe distance. But it wasn't meaningless; it was speaking what many hold to be a truth, even if it's one they've never examined. Or then, when I was a priest in Worcester, a similar incident. I was one side of the road and a group of lads the other. Seeing me approach they shouted out together 'Sex, sex, sex,' no doubt thinking I'd faint. Again, it was and wasn't meaningless; whatever else they knew about Christianity they had picked up a belief that it was prudish about sex. So we do have to be proactive in explaining what really we are about; what is our life; what is our faith; what is our worship. This is where the barn comes in, because it will enhance our teaching capability, it will enable us to welcome more groups and give them a better experience of what we are about.

They complement each other, the barn and the cathedral. One is a symbol in stone that speaks wordlessly of God's abiding presence among his people, and whose vaults and voids somehow evoke a sense of awe in the human heart. The other is a building more earthed in the ordinary life and labour of humanity, where we can tell of what goes on in this place, and why; where we can answer questions and help people learn what it is to be a stranger and pilgrim who seeks the City of God. We can no longer expect that people who come here will have much understanding of what it's all about, so we have to put more effort, more resources, more imagination, into educating people through the experience of their visit, and the teaching they receive, something of what it is all about. If families and schools are doing this less we have to be doing it more, and the dedication today of the barn for use in education is a step on our journey in that direction.

In all the busyness of life in this place it's easy to forget that a cathedral isn't an end in itself, but a means to an end. That end is the manifestation of the Kingdom of God. Without that end before our eyes we might as well hand the keys over to the ministry of tourism and go home. Thank God though, we do try to hold that end before our eyes, however imperfectly, so that we can give thanks for the past with sincerity and face the future with faith.