

Leicester Cathedral
Tent or temple: re-shaping for the 21st century
Sunday 16 September 2007

The first Christians, who lived to witness to the life, death and resurrection of Christ, did not have the paraphernalia with which we surround ourselves today. No Bible, no distinctive liturgy, no church buildings. All that they had had to be borrowed, or forged, or created, mostly (to begin with) from the Jewish traditions in which the apostles had been nurtured. Hebrew scriptures, Hebrew prayers, Hebrew rituals, including the rite of baptism which we enact today, and Hebrew gathering-places. As time went on, and the followers of Jesus became distinct from the people of Israel, as the emerging community began to call itself Christian, as it began to add testimony instruction, theology and gospel to its scriptures, as it began to add rituals, especially the Eucharist which we celebrate today, it also eventually began to construct buildings for worship. But that process took years, centuries even.

And because the process took years, even centuries, the changes were often imperceptible to individual followers. Somewhere in the back of our minds I suspect is often the image of the churches which are most precious to us coming down fully formed from heaven. That image is reinforced by statues of the patron saint of a particular cathedral cradling a perfect detailed model of it in his arms. We don't have, here, a middle of 4th century St Martin cradling this cathedral. For very good reason. In the 4th century, if there was a church on this site (if so, it would have been one of the first in this country), it was wooden. By the 11th century it was stone. We have a few signs of it left in the North Aisle. In the medieval period aisles were added, and then fell into ruin, in the 19th century the spire was added, in the 20th century the pews were removed, and the screen added and the gravestones moved...and so on. Irene Turlington will tell you much more not because she was here all the while, but because she is studying the history of this building to tell our visitors about it, and about the followers of Jesus who worship here daily.

But let's go back to those first Christians and their worship. These Christians followed a man who had been constantly on the move. Jesus inherited that profound sense at the heart of Jewish faith of God's calling his people to be sojourners, nomads, wanderers. So Jesus journeyed, and took his followers with him, out in the wilderness, up into the hills up the long road to Jerusalem, engendering a real closeness. And it didn't stop at Jesus' death. Almost the first appearance of the risen Christ was to two followers on a journey to Emmaus. Now when you are on the move, you tend not to give priority to buildings. They are pretty heavy to carry around. You may have some special objects to remind you of the heart of your faith, and something to protect you from the weather. But that's all. And there remains a strong sense that God in Christ is still to be encountered most intensely within temporary structures: in Keswick Convention, or Taize, at Greenbelt. It is no coincidence that Liverpool Metropolitan Cathedral was built to look like a wigwam, and remind people that they were called to be the pilgrim people of God. A holy gathering.

But journeying was not the only possible place of encounter with God. The first Christians continued to gather and support one another in Jerusalem, the city dominated by the architecture, rituals and politics of the Temple. Where they went daily. The temple, built by Solomon, newly restored at the time of Jesus was a tremendous feat, one of the greatest buildings of the ancient world, glorious and evocative giving pilgrims a shiver up the spine. But there was an ambiguity about the temple. It distanced people from God, it glorified the king, it separated people from each other. Jesus was only the latest in a line of prophets to declare the temple cult apostasy. For the temple, with its courtyards not only grounded the people of God, inhibiting their wandering, inhibiting God's freedom, it also stratified the people of God. Its series of courtyards acted like

sieves, sifting out the foreigners, the women, then the ritually low-born. Only very very few could enter the sacrificial area where the incessant round of animal offerings sought to ensure God's continued favour. Yet for all the ambiguities it was and remains, even as a ruin, a profoundly holy place.

In AD 70 the Jerusalem Temple was razed to the ground by the Romans. Judaism reinvented itself around the synagogue and the home. But by then Christianity had separated itself from it and had begun to create its own places for meeting and worship. Once again they had to borrow ideas. And their ideas came from their life together in Jerusalem: from the upper room where Jesus had gathered them.

The upper room was significant because it was a constant reminder of Jesus' presence. And his followers continued to seek out and mark places which offered reminders, first of Jesus' life, then places which reminded them of Jesus' followers lives, and increasingly in the church under persecution, their deaths. Christians gathered around shrines of the saints, and over the years, constructed great buildings as giant reliquaries: think of Canterbury Cathedral built over Thomas Becket's place of murder, or St David's cathedral built over the burial place of Dewi. And increasingly, as in the temple, spaces were set aside for those regarded as holy, or powerful, or both. Think of the spaces you move around in Canterbury, and the change of levels up to the height of Augustine's throne. There is a profound sense of being in a holy place, and of hierarchy.

The alternative was to focus not on sacrifice, but on community. The upper room was, after all the gathering place of a home. Home groups have a very long and very honourable history. As these domestic locations became too small, and as being a Christian became, under emperor Constantine, the acceptable face of faith, Christians began to meet in halls: they started constructing buildings which looked like, were copied from, the town halls of the day, the basilica, the halls of the ruler. These were open buildings, with good sightlines and acoustics, and a long aisle for processions. Think of the setting for the (nearly) wedding of Charles and Duckface in *Four Weddings and a Funeral*: filmed in St Bartholomew Smithgate, a classic basilica form, a space for holy gatherings...well maybe not in the case of *4 Weddings*.

The two types, the holy place and the holy gathering continue to influence the architecture of churches and cathedrals, though the typology gets stretched. When Christopher Wren made his first model for the new St Paul's in square form for gatherings, the clergy demanded that he changed it and created structures for hierarchy and a long nave for their processions. When Basil Spence designed Coventry, his brief to the artists was to contribute to an artistic casket of jewels, erected next to what he saw, not as the shrine of St Michael, its patron saint, but the shrine to the sacrifice of ordinary people during the Second World War.

So where does this take us? Cardinal Newman, who had a deep influence on English church architecture, said 'material edifices are no part of religion, but you can't have religious services without them'. He knew that the church was not, first of all, a building, but the body of Christ, the people of God a holy gathering. He also knew that tents are great in summer but chilly in winter, and that buildings could offer a profound sense of the holy even the heavenly, especially to those who lived in the grim poverty of 19th century England.

As we consider how this cathedral should continue to develop architecturally for the 21st century, what ideas shall we borrow as we try to ensure that this cathedral can continue to proclaim more clearly that it is holy place and a place of gathering, a place of remembering, a place of inspiration and of encounter with God in Jesus Christ, a place above all where the community of faith, the body of Christ is renewed and transformed to bring life to the whole world?