

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 25th April 2021

During World War II, the chamber of the House of Commons in the Palace of Westminster was destroyed by German bombs. As Britain's parliamentary body deliberated how and when it would rebuild, the Prime Minister, Winston Churchill, rose to defend reconstructing it in the exact style and layout as the previous version.

He opened his speech with what is now a classic statement of the importance of architecture, "We shape our buildings and afterwards our buildings shape us".

Churchill then went on to argue that the shape and size of the room were integral to how the House of Commons functioned. Among other reasons, he contended that the small room was necessary for their conversational way of doing business, as the smaller chamber obviously made the discussions more intimate.

Churchill's basic insight is that our physical environments subtly affect how we act in ways we don't usually consciously attend to or notice.

The theologian, Jamie Smith, puts it in a slightly different context in that a building "can be an incubator that shapes us into a certain kind of people." Those splendid mediaeval cathedrals throughout this land and across Europe make certain responses and dispositions more likely than others. We are awed by the architecture and the ambience that the stones create. Buildings like Westminster Abbey, York Minster and Glasgow Cathedral make it far easier to create a sense of quiet reverence, of holiness, of "otherness". Those spaces even make certain forms of music more plausible – Faure's Requiem and Schubert's Mass in G are built for the soaring heights of St Peter's Basilica, whereas a praise band with drums and guitars would be an acoustic nightmare.

Buildings or television screens or praise bands or stained glass do not determine our behaviour one iota or make us better Christians, but they do make certain forms of life more plausible.

Of course, we understand full well that "the Church" is "the people of God", "the Body of Christ", Christians gathered together to worship, to support each other, to learn to follow and to serve Christ, to know the energising power of the Holy Spirit in our lives.

That is fundamental, but we should never disregard the importance of the Church building itself.

I find it very sad today that many recent Church structures in Scotland often seem "of the world" rather than "otherworldly", "down to earth" rather than "heavenly", more secular than sacred, with tip up seats, more like the King's Theatre or the Odeon cinema, rather than places where the holiness of God is felt.

Of course, God does not need our worship, nor temples made of stone, but He deserves them greatly, the best that we can offer. Our response to the Cross of our Saviour is to return His love in our thoughts and deeds, by feeding the hungry and caring for the poor and making sure our church buildings are things of beauty to His glory.

I have always held firmly that a Church building should be a sermon in stone – a space that lifts our thoughts to higher things. The walls that surround us, the stained glass of the windows, the wood of pulpit, pew and table, the notes of the organ all help to create a sense of the sacred and prepare us to hear God's Word and share in His sacraments, embracing the eternal in the ephemeral.

O, I know only too well that I am a bit of an anachronism in the Kirk today, where we are being told more and more that buildings do not count for very much; they are simply a place to meet for worship. I, for one, cannot and indeed, will never hold with that notion.

For me, people should feel that they are entering a place out of the ordinary, a place in which the concerns of life can be seen in relation to eternity. There should be a sense of mystery, even of strangeness, expressed by the architecture – beautiful, harmonious, transcendent.

A church should never be convenient to enter like going into a department store, comfortable like your favourite café, or predictable like a lecture theatre. Rather, it should ever be a place whose reason for existence is to foster encounter with the divine. As we sit within its walls, we should be helped to focus on God.

I was very interested to read an article recently in which the author was highlighting the fact that these past years there has been an upsurge of attendance of people, and particularly young people, at worship in our ancient abbeys and cathedral churches, places where many who are searching and enquiring are finding spiritual needs being met.

The Congregation of St Nicholas Church in Prestwick is greatly blessed in the sanctuary bequeathed to them by earlier generations – ordinary men and women of the Burgh who sought the best there was to honour God, folk who sacrificed and gave generously and worked hard that the Gospel would ever be preached and lived out within such a stately and holy place.

A visitor said to me this past Sunday, “What a beautiful building!” and I heartily concurred.

And you see, the reason for that comment is quite simply because the very nature of the building itself leaves one enriched, comforted, inspired.

And how grateful we are and how indebted to those of our own day who make sure that it is maintained and enhanced for whatever the future might hold.

Whilst our nation is being flooded with mosques and temples, we must never become deceived into thinking that church buildings are of little consequence to the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ. We cannot surrender the skylines of our town and cities to other religions.

When we keep a Church open and care for it and beautify it, then I am convinced that we are building an altar for the fire of God – like Moses before the burning bush; like Jacob seeing his ladder up to heaven; like Elijah constructing an altar, we are ensuring that our community, our parish, our neighbours can encounter the Divine.

Friends, God does leave His mark upon the masonry!

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Locum Minister