

St Nicholas Parish Church, Prestwick

The Thought for the Week

Sunday 4th July 2021

I didn't think that anyone took the trouble to send postcards these days (apart from me, that is!). I was proved wrong this past week when a postcard arrived from friends who are visiting family in the New Forest and who had been to Bournemouth for the day.

Bournemouth has long been a favourite holiday resort for Scottish folk and, indeed, the town is closely associated with memories of our own Robert Louis Stevenson who wrote "The Strange Case of Dr Jekyll and Mr Hyde", and most of his novel "Kidnapped", from his home "Skerryvore" on the west cliff, a house given to him by his father, and the name of which was obviously suggested by the latter's lighthouse enterprises in Scotland! The novelist Henry James, visited Stevenson there most evenings when James was staying with his invalid sister, Alice.

It is a few years now since I visited this very charming seaside town on the south coast which possesses such a wealth and variety of hotels and guest houses. The Poet Laureate, John Betjeman, described Bournemouth as "a stately Victorian duchess.... wearing a large and wealthy coat of precious furs".

We stayed in the Durley Dean Hotel, with its sublime panorama of sea and cliff and which gave us very easy access to the promenade and the town centre. We could watch the huge cruise liners which had left Southampton, sailing their way down the Solent en route for exotic spots.

The town's motto, if I remember correctly, is "Pulchritudo et Salubritas", and if you remember your Third Year Latin, that translates as "Beauty and Health", and there is no doubt of the appositeness of those words.

If you were to ask me to select one of the most attractive features, there are several that I would mention – the piers with their brass bands; the strings of the Bournemouth Symphony Orchestra from the concert hall in the famous pavilion; the seafront with its rows of brightly coloured bathing huts, from which the clatter of teacups and the strains of radios are heard well into the evening - but I should unhesitatingly choose its gardens, some of which snake through the heart of the town. I can recall the flowers in the zenith of their summer glory – a riot of colour and beauty for locals and visitors alike. And as you stroll along the pathways, there are water features and fountains flanking the beds and banks of blooms. I can't capture its loveliness in words.

But as you leisurely wind your way along the path through the gardens in the centre, if you look up you will see the magnificent spire of Richmond Hill St Andrew's United Reformed Church. That is well worth a visit!

I can understand why it has been voted the most beautiful non-conformist church building in England. Opened in 1859 as Richmond Hill Congregational Church, the architecture is quite exquisite. The very imposing exterior is matched by a grand and spacious interior, with a seating capacity of 1,200. Here out of the noise of the street, is a beautiful calm, with

magnificent stained glass and towering Gothic arches. Warm and welcoming, the perfect seaside church!

Within a very few years, the church became one of the most famous congregational churches in the UK, not least because of some of its outstanding ministers, one of whom has long been a hero of mine – the Revd Dr J D Jones, who was minister there for almost forty years.

“J.D” as he was familiarly known everywhere, was an ecclesiastical statesman of the first rank. Well known here in Scotland because of his frequent excursions north of the Tweed, Dr Jones was acknowledged to be the “Unmitred Bishop of Congregationalism”, an outstanding figure of his time.

All during his Ministry in Bournemouth, his pulpit popularity remained undiminished, and Richmond Hill Church was the Mecca of worshippers of all denominations, attracting crowded congregations of Protestants of all shades all year round. In the holiday season, however, many of the visitors who flocked to worship there on Sunday mornings and to hear Dr Jones preach, had to be turned away as there was no more room! O, think of how wonderful that must have been!

We are told that there was nothing very startling or profound in J.D’s preaching, and certainly nothing sensational, but what folk felt was essentially that he was addressing himself to the personal private needs of individuals as he opened up the Word of God to them. He brought them comfort and consolation, which not only wiped away their tears, but gave them a new sense of strength. He didn’t harangue them; he didn’t castigate them; he didn’t dangle them over the fires of hell; he didn’t worry them with great public issues. And that largely explained why the pews were full on each returning Sunday – baffled and confused men and women were crying out for a sure word from the Lord, and they got it from the pulpit at Richmond Hill.

One sermon in particular, on the centrality of the Scriptures in the life of the Christian, was remembered by a summer visitor. In the course of the sermon, Dr Jones, said, “The words of the playwright will fade away; the lyrics of the song writer will be forgotten; the cadences of the poet will turn to dust...” And at this point, he quietly lifted the pulpit bible, quite dramatically, and exclaimed, “But the Word of the Lord endures for ever!”

It was that Word which was the foundation of his whole Ministry. He knew his people by name and he carried their burdens on his heart. Those who were anxious or afraid or sad found in him not merely a sympathetic ear, but a true encourager and support in all of life’s storms and trials.

Over the years, Dr Jones was offered many other pulpits throughout the land, and at one point he was asked by the leader of one of the political parties whether he would consent to be a Parliamentary candidate, being offered the choice of constituencies.

But he turned them all down, quoting Nehemiah’s answer to Sanballat and Tobiah when they tried to tempt him away from his work of building the wall of Jerusalem – “I am doing a great work so that I cannot come down.”

If the truth be told, I did not really want to retire from the Ministry when I reached 65, but the time had come for someone younger to lead the good folk of St Columba in Ayr into the

future. I did not really want to “come down from building the wall.” I so wanted to continue to preach and minister in the service of our Lord.

Yet, it was the correct decision and God has blessed me by moving me to another section of “the wall” here in Prestwick St Nicholas where I have the immense privilege of being your Locum as we look forward in faith to the next chapter in the congregation’s wonderful story. There is life in the old dog yet, I feel!

When J.D. passed away, it was very fitting that on his tombstone, his epitaph describes him simply as “Preacher of the Gospel.”

I can think of no higher honour.

The Revd Fraser R Aitken

Locum Minister