



Quinquagesima, 2017

Hampton Court: Mattins

Sunday 26 February

Lord, it is good for us to be here (Matthew 17.4)

Last week I had the great privilege of consecrating a church. I've never done that before. I'd like to think it was a success but, pleasingly, there is no way of knowing this side of eternity.

The rites of consecration are not prescribed in the Church of England, so we did everything that's possible, just about. A solemn prayer was said and the walls of the building were anointed with holy oil – the same oil that is used for anointing the sovereign at the coronation. But the most significant action centred on the altar.

The altar top was anointed with that same oil, marked with five crosses, reminding us of the five wounds in the body of Jesus at his death on the cross, and in his resurrection. The a brazier was set on the bare altar and incense was offered, evoking an imagery that is common in both Old and New Testaments, reminding us of the altar on which Noah offered a sacrifice that was a sweet savour (Genesis 8.21), issuing in the everlasting covenant God makes with us, and St Paul's description of Jesus as "an offering and a sacrifice to God for a sweet-smelling savour" (Ephesians 5.2).

Then the altar was covered with a fair linen cloth, and adorned with flowers, and finally candles placed and lit with these words: “Light of Christ, shine forth in the Church and bring all nations to the fullness of truth”.

In the process of consecrating the altar, we were defining what gives the church building meaning and purpose. The altar is to be the focus of prayer for the whole gathering of the Christian community in that building – prayer described as the Church’s banquet (a phrase borrowed from the poet George Herbert). This prayer would commit the earthly Church, the Church militant, to justice and freedom for the oppressed; it is also firmly fixed on what management jargon today calls “outcomes”, namely the entry of every man, woman and child, into the heavenly Jerusalem, the eternal city of peace, in which their dignity of the children of God is realised in all its diversity and beauty.

As is often the case in church, all this was declared by the officiating minister with due solemnity, and a degree of mystification on the part of the congregation. Too much information, all at once, I think, in terms of symbolism, Biblical cross referencing and theological definition. The prayer was a study course in itself.

And that’s where the lawyer came into his own. In the Church of England’s rite of consecration of a church, it is the reading of the consecration sentence by the lawyer, the Chancellor or Registrar, that seals the deed. And as you would expect from a lawyer, it is a very exact statement. It refers to a plan and the footprint on the earth of the building and any additional land that is to be consecrated – all shaded in blue, to avoid doubt. The consecration is definitive; you can’t pretend it isn’t there even if you don’t do much about it. The building might fall down or be destroyed by fire; but the land is still consecrated; and more than that, the land as it goes down to the earth’s core is also consecrated, made sacred to the Lord God, who created it. This is one definition, in legal terms, of how we are to encounter heaven.

We learn from today's first reading that Abram was rather good at building altars, and they become a statement of his encounter with God in specific places, but also in the process of his journeying to a destination and an identity that he does not yet know. The emergence of his identity will involve a name change, from Abram to Abraham, and his destination is a land of promise, Canaan, that carries the metaphor of being a home for ever – an everlasting possession, an image of heaven.

The sense that a visible, defined and material earthly altar can be the place of meeting or of intersection with the invisible, eternal reality of heaven is something that Abraham's altars also convey. You will remember that Abraham builds an altar on which to sacrifice his beloved son, Isaac; an altar on which God himself provides the sacrifice in a ram that seems to come from nowhere. For the people of Israel, the sacrifice of Isaac, in the ram that God provides, finds expression also in the Passover lamb, and for Christians, this identification gives us the language and imagery by which to understand the sacrifice of Jesus on the altar of the cross. In each case, time and eternity intersect, as moments in which God's work of redeeming and perfecting a beautiful but fractured world moves to its completion.

In today's second lesson the story of the transfiguration continues to invite us to focus on these points of intersection. Peter instinctively wants to build three churches or tabernacles: you can see that he is obviously going to be the first Pope. And his instinct is right. Chapels and church buildings, as sacred space in which there stands an altar, are a way of identifying our points of intersection with eternity and God's works of redemption.

But on this very point there is an interesting difference between the gospel accounts of the transfiguration. In Matthew, as we heard today, Peter says to Jesus, "If thou wilt, let us make here three tabernacles". In Mark's account,

Peter is simply afraid and blurts out the first thing that comes into his mind – rather characteristically, we might think. But Luke is more perceptive. He records that Peter speaks, “not knowing what he said”. It’s as though Peter is in a mystical rapture, saying something profound that is not of his own devising.

We remember that this happens on another occasion, when Peter, famously, says to Jesus, “You are the Christ” and Jesus responds, “flesh and blood hath not revealed it unto thee, but my Father in heaven”.

The point is that in the vision of the Transfiguration, Peter sees the truth about what tabernacles are for; they are points of connection between earth and heaven; they are where the lightening of divine glory hits the ground, not because we have pushed a button or muttered a particular formula, but because God is like this; true to his promises, constant and abiding, and yet ever new, never still, always more than we thought or expected.

Peter’s statement articulates why our chapels and churches matter to us. He makes the point that we function as mortal beings in the material world. And we can know that when we consecrate, to the glory of God an altar in its sacred space, in a church or chapel, we assert that we are more than mortal and this world is more than matter. It can be the place, the environment, of transfiguration. It’s where you can be changed by encounter with God in prayer and worship. It’s where you can be shaped into an agent of change, of justice and liberation in the society on earth of which you are a part, by the power of the Holy Spirit; and it is where the Church militant discovers her true identity, as the body that gives birth to the Church triumphant in the glory of heaven.

Tis good, Lord, to be here. Because here we are not simply in Hampton Court Palace: here we are on the margins of the courts of heaven.

As you prepare for your keeping of Lent, remember with expectation and awe that at the conclusion of these 40 days, you will see Jesus only, on the cross,

opening to you, in the rending of his flesh, the gateway to heaven. At that very point he nails time to eternity, and connects irreversibly your life with his. Take care to attend to this connection with holy fear, with joy and with expectation; for in it you will find the threads of enrichment and hope, that will lead you to the glory of heaven.