

Centenary of St Paul's Cathedral, Dunedin

Isaiah 6.1-8; 2 Corinthians 4.5-15; Matthew 28.16-end

It's a joy to be here and an honour to be invited to be part of this wonderful celebration...

For Clare and me our first introduction to NZ was Christchurch where we encountered the raw memories of earthquake. We visited the 'cardboard' cathedral as well as the ruined one and we tuned into that uncomfortable debate about whether the old building should be repaired or demolished. But that's church buildings for you. They are a blessing and a curse, a limitation and a liberation, they draw us towards God, and they can get between us and God.

I used to be a chaplain at Manchester University in the north of England and I inherited a building that had been opened with great fanfares 10 years earlier. People's self-satisfaction on that occasion had been somewhat wounded by the preacher who began his sermon with these words, 'Do we do well, at a time when the church has too many buildings, to open another?' A friend of mine told me of the opening of another church building in his council estate parish where the same preacher preached the same sermon, 'Do we do well, at a time when the church has too many buildings, to open another?'

The preacher was none other than David Jenkins who, some of you may remember, became a somewhat controversial Bishop of Durham. He had the knack of asking the right questions and a turn of phrase that bamboozled the theologically illiterate media. So, for example, he was accused one Easter of claiming that the resurrection was merely a magic trick with a bag of bones when in fact what he actually said was the resurrection was **not** merely a magic trick with a bag of bones.

Nevertheless, were Bishop David, by some magic trick, to have been transported back to Dunedin in 1919 to preach at the dedication of

this impressive Cathedral, we might surmise that he would have begun his sermon with these words, ‘Do we do well...?’ And I’m sure he would have been just as unpopular in Dunedin for asking the question as he was in Manchester.

But on an occasion like this, with our longer perspective on the controversies of those early years, perhaps we are well placed to attempt an answer to that question. Did they do well, our ancestors, to press ahead in spite of worries about whether it could be afforded, whether it was the right building in the right place – whether, in a community traumatised by the First World War, the dedication of a new Cathedral was a commitment to the future or a distraction from the real work of Christian ministry?

Did they do well? I can’t possibly say – but you can, some of you with detailed knowledge of this church and its community over many years. And I press the question because in due course, God willing, it will be our turn to be under scrutiny when, 100 years from now, an avatar of David Jenkins or someone else asks of us, ‘Did they do well? For actually, even now the issue before us is far less about what our predecessors did but what we’re doing now with the legacy they left us. Are we doing well?

How might we set about answering that question? Given that the church is primarily community, that it’s made of living stones like you and me, how might we living stones assess the use we make of these old stones?

To help us answer that, let me enlist the help of another famous church leader, Rowan Williams. Shortly after he stepped down as Archbishop of Canterbury he gave a talk at the Edinburgh Book Festival and in the question and answer session that followed he was asked, ‘Given your experience as Archbishop, can you tell us, please, what’s the point of the church? What’s it for?’ Bishop Rowan thought for a long moment and then he said, ‘The point of the

church is to worship God and to grow in holiness.’ Can it really be that simple, we asked ourselves? Or perhaps these words aren’t that simple at all.

To worship God? Judging from our first reading, the prophet Isaiah would have understood this. ‘I saw the Lord,’ he says, ‘high and lofty and the hem of his robe filled the temple.’

‘Awesome’ is a much devalued word nowadays... but for Isaiah this was truly an awesome experience. He was drawn into the worship of heaven, into an encounter with the living God, and whilst this gave him a sense of his own unworthiness (‘I am a man of unclean lips’) it also propelled him to respond to God, ‘Here I am, send me.’ And through the burning of the coal from the Temple he found that his life was changed.

Does worship do this for us? Do we expect it to? I suspect that deep down we do. Why else do we turn up on a Sunday? Why else do we surround key moments of our lives – birth, marriage, death, celebration, lament, crisis – with worship? Why else immerse ourselves in praise, surround ourselves with stories of faith, of crucifixion, of resurrection, of Eucharist, trusting as we do so the words of Jesus in today’s gospel, ‘I am with you always, to the end of the age’?

And as we do all this, we catch glimpses, as if peering through cloud, of what holiness might mean for us. A holiness we see reflected in the face of Jesus Christ – reflected sometimes in the lives and personalities of those around us. We call it sanctity, saintliness. And we begin to understand that the holiness we aspire to doesn’t separate us from others or build high walls between us and (what we take to be) the corrupting influence of others, nor is it content with a warm and cosy inward glow. But it is a fire in us, as Isaiah discovered, it can burn us – for it is the God who said, ‘let there be light’ who makes that same light shine in us and in our lives. Treasure in clay

jars, for sure, but seen to be real treasure when the life and grace of Jesus is made visible, yes, even in our bodies and our lives.

So then, if the point of the church, of its living stones, is to worship God and to grow in holiness then surely the reason we have buildings, dead stones, is so that they can help us to be living stones – nothing more... or less.

We can, of course, worship in many places and in the end a church building is primarily a shelter. Yet human beings have through the ages created holy places and filled them with symbols, with sights and sounds and smells, with pictures and objects that evoke in us a sense of God – that lead us into wonder, adoration, confession and prayer. Spaces to gather; spaces where we renew our resolve to follow Jesus; spaces to which others may find their way, find welcome, and find God high and lifted up – where they may hear the call of God and discover that they've become disciples.

Is this true of this Cathedral? Does it fulfil this purpose? Have we done well? If we can answer 'yes' to that then there's something to celebrate today. Yet in celebrating, we also face ourselves with a challenge. For we can't truly worship God without acknowledging where our lives fall short; we can't speak of holiness without remembering that holiness and wholeness mean essentially the same thing. Just as we can't speak of peace without recognizing that the Shalom of God, the Salaam of God offers us a vision of a world deeply at one with itself – where the justice of God flows down like rivers. Like those rivers flowing into Milford Sound – rivers of justice, the inevitable overflow of faith.

What does it mean, then, to call this building holy and to offer its use for another hundred years in a world that is fragmented and hurting and at war with itself, where division is accentuated by vast inequalities and where access to privilege, opportunity and security

is for so many in such short supply? What does it mean to be a holy place on a planet despoiled and damaged by unholy living?

What might it mean for this building to be a space where unity, peace and holiness is fostered in such a way that the weak and excluded of this city and this world find they are precious in God's sight? What might we need to do, what decisions might we need to make, for this to be possible, for God to be worshipped not just with our lips and in our rituals but in our lives?

Only we can make this happen – the building can't do it for us, even if it provides an iconic presence in this city and diocese. Only we can make it a place of welcome, openness, inclusion, access, warmth and light – a place of encouragement and of challenge. Only we can demonstrate in our actions what it means to worship God and to grow in holiness. Only we can make demonstrate that the resurrection, far from being merely a magic trick with a bag of bones, speaks of hope for the world and lives transformed.

If this is so, then no matter what becomes of this building 100 years from now, and no matter what the court of public opinion might say about us, in God's eyes, yes, we shall have done well.

+John
Bishop of Edinburgh