

CITY OR TENT

Sermon preached by Canon Ray Nichols

August 29th, 2010

One of the glories of the Christian Church is the splendour, beauty and spiritual quality of its buildings. Take a look at any visitors' book - see how people from far and near react to the experience of walking into a village church - and note what they have written.

Many of us know churches and cathedrals, wonderful examples of man's inspired art and architecture which remain forever in our hearts and minds.

We live in an age where the Christian message of love and redemption in Christ is accepted by a shrinking minority - at least in England. And yet we have the church buildings - you might say the Church's "plant" - which is often way beyond its practical requirements and consequently an increasing burden on its ability to maintain them.

We have the good fortune - and what a great blessing it is - to worship in a building well-used, much loved and soon to be considerably enhanced.

I have precious memories of churches made of mud and wattle, with grass roofs and dung floors, no seats, a rough wooden altar and a box for the preacher to stand on. They can be quickly built and just as quickly demolished and moved elsewhere. One of the things I tried to do for the Church in Kenya was to stop them aspiring to stone-built copies of English churches, with flying buttresses and Gothic arches, all totally inappropriate in African bush villages and a vast millstone around the necks of succeeding generations.

There is an incredible urge amongst religious people to establish a sense of permanence. We long for the solid, tangible fixed expression and summation of what we believe and desire to live by. And it's not only Christians who feel that way. In recent times we have seen what happens to other great world religions when the desire for permanence and certainty overwhelms all other factors.

The ultra-Orthodox Jew cannot accept any alternative to the literal interpretation of the Old Testament, that God gave the land of Palestine to them and to nobody else. And that has become Israel's political position set in concrete.

The fundamentalist Muslim, misinterpreting the Koran, believes that the only way to preserve the faith intact is to chop off the hands of a thief and stone the adulteress to death.

We have recently had a rather distasteful example of an African archbishop insisting on the removal of the Archbishop of Canterbury because he does not accept his interpretation of scripture with regard to homosexuality.

Big changes in Ministry and Worship have been made since Cranmer and the BCP.

I yield to no-one in my regard for the Anglican Book of Common Prayer. I have published it in many languages. I was first taken to Matins and Evensong more than 80 years ago. But as a place of worship can become fossilised in the past, so can the Order which we use, whether it is BCP or Common Worship. Don't yearn for certainties, we are a Pilgrim People - moving, not static. Not just affiliated to Christ but following Him. That means that constant change is here to stay.

Some years ago I was privileged to walk with the Bishop of Winchester and 70 others

from Dorchester Abbey to Winchester Cathedral.

It was the 1300th anniversary of the transference of the Bishopric from a small village, where the mission to Wessex had begun, to the growing centre of the kingdom.

We carried with us a processional Cross (commissioned by the then Dean of Winchester). The blades of the stainless steel Cross had bright and dull areas reflecting the profiles of a piece of stone encapsulated in the centre. As we carried it each day along the ancient Ridgeway, the sun caught the bright patches and brought the Cross to life. At night, as we placed it in its stand, it seemed to die. Next morning as we resumed our Pilgrimage it burst into life again. It became a powerful parable to us all. (Make sure, in visiting Winchester Cathedral, that you look for the Birinus Cross.)

When we continue our journey of following the ever moving Risen Christ, we are caught up in His dynamic energy and the brightness of His shining light.

When we stop, settle down, rest on our achievements, lose the vision - spiritual life begins to fade and die.

The human instinct, especially in matters of religion, is to confuse making a start with continuing a journey. We want to fix the position at which we have arrived, by building-in complete certainty and dismissing all possible alternatives. This leaves no room for movement, growth, development, flexibility or change.

King David said to Nathan the prophet "See now, I am living in a house of cedar, but the ark of God stays in a tent." Interesting ! God seems to prefer living in a tent. God listens to their conversation and then joins in. "Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day. I have been moving about in a tent with a tabernacle."

There's something rather important here. Israel wanted its own place and when they'd built it they wanted God to join them ! Oh, we do love to settle down permanently. It's certainty we want. Let's decide what the faith really is. Write it down. Put it on tablets of stone. Create the institution and the infrastructure. Get the building up. Lay down carefully and in detail what we are to do in it. Then invite God to give it His blessing. Then all will be safe and well, unchanged and unchanging. Certain and beyond question.

I read in a biography of Dr Dillistone, great teacher and Dean of Liverpool, some words which he took note of early in his life, and kept them all his days. "**All certainties are dead certainties**". And perhaps if you forget everything else in this sermon it might be worth remembering that. Arriving at what we think is a final and complete certainty in our Christian pilgrimages is to die.

Most of us live in comfortable houses. Physically we are, to a great degree, safe and secure. Spiritually, if we are followers of Christ, we live in tents. We are pilgrims on a journey, with no fixed abode apart from that Holy and Immortal home which is the presence of the Living God. "*Here we have no continuing city, for we seek the city which is to come.*" (Hebrews 13.14)

We don't belong here - we're camping.

We must not seek for false certainties which can only turn to dust in our hands. The only certainty worth having is the certainty of God's Love, Christ's saving Grace, the daily strength and companionship of the Holy Spirit, and the sure and certain Hope that we are journeying to our Maker and Redeemer -

To Whom be Glory, Might, Majesty, Dominion and Power, now and for evermore. AMEN.