

Sermon for the Inaugural Service of the Order of St Mary, Warwick

Jacob said 'How awesome is this place. This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven'. Jacob's dream of the ladder depicted in a stained-glass roundel here at Saint Mary's is where he meets with God.

Encountering God, he names the place where he dreamt 'Bethel', house of God ... and he marks it out - in a kind of consecration, a setting apart, with a stone. 'This stone which I have set up shall be God's house.' Later, prompted by God, as recorded in Genesis 35, he returns to build an altar in that place, Bethel, the house of God.

'How awesome is this place!' Jacob's words then are also my words now in Saint Mary's. How awesome is *this* place! So many people coming through the doors of this great church will sense, or feel, or even sometimes say: how awesome is this place. There is a 'wow' factor. Well, you might say, there is a wow factor in Warwick Castle, or Buckingham palace, which there is.

But today I'm talking about something even more than that 'wow' factor, the 'awe' factor. The awe factor gives us sense of another dimension, which leads to, which points to something more, the beyond in our midst ... which we call God.

Buildings such as this one can change lives.

Many years ago, I was visiting a Benedictine monastery in California, a Benedictine monastery with sisters and brothers (like Mucknell Abbey for example in Worcestershire). One of the sisters there shared with me her faith journey. She was not a Christian when she first visited England. She had no faith in God. What brought her to faith was her visits to English cathedrals. Spending time alone in some of our oldest and greatest cathedrals, she experienced the *awe* (how awesome is this place!) through the architecture, also perhaps through centuries of prayer which leave their invisible mark in the ether of the building...

Through spending time in these cathedrals, built for the glory of God, her heart and mind were raised to a sense of the reality of God and the presence of God. These buildings, not sermons, not words were the catalyst for her coming to faith and committing her life to God in the religious life. Buildings such as this

can point us beyond ourselves to God, beyond the finite to the eternal, beyond the physical to the spiritual.

But it is not all about the age of the building. I don't know if any of you have been to Ripon College Cuddesdon and seen, actually I want to say *experienced*, the new Edward King chapel there. It is designed by the architect, Niall McLaughlin, to draw people Godwards, to evoke a sense of worship

For those with antennae sensitive to atmosphere, something happens. The Observer architecture critic, Rowan Moore, a convinced and determined atheist, on visiting the chapel, wrote 'As someone as certain about the non-existence of God as I can be about anything, I feel a touch disorientated by a new space devoted with conviction to making the opposite case.'

I think also of the recent fire and destruction of much of Notre Dame Cathedral. It affected deeply the psyche of this most secular of European nations – huge amounts of money were raised in a very short time. This building was – and is - deeply important, one might say, to the identity and even morale of the French people - and indeed to many all over the world. It speaks of transcendence ... that there is a purpose and meaning to existence that both embraces and transcends all our earthly struggles.

To those in the Order of St Mary, inaugurated tonight, your generosity is helping to ensure the existence and the future of this extraordinary and magnificent building. In so doing, you are not only serving the people who can see it and experience it today, but those who will see it and experience it tomorrow and in future generations. I would go further still, in so doing you are also serving the purposes of God. This building points to God, the greatness of God, the beauty of God and above all the *presence* of God in our midst. Complementary to the architecture, built to the glory of God, I would add the *music* of this church offered to the greater glory of God which lifts up our hearts and minds, drawing us towards the mystery of God, who is both immanent and transcendent, with us and beyond us.

Beyond and within all this is something more.

Churchill wrote perceptively that 'we make buildings and buildings make us.' Those of us who experience and enjoy St Mary's as a place of worship continue

to be touched, subliminally perhaps, by the sense of the presence God permeating through these stones in this place, sanctified by prayer. So that these physical stones help create and nourish the Living Stones of the Church, the *people* of God. I have had the privilege of visiting Israel/Palestine many times and recently co-led a pilgrimage there. Christian tour companies recognise the importance of the physical stones of history – where Jesus lived and walked and talked. So pilgrims get to walk in the footsteps of Jesus, to visit the sites recorded in the gospels and to pray in them. This is such a gift and an enrichment to their /our journeys of faith. But we also meet the living stones, the people, Christian brothers and sisters whose lives are deeply difficult and challenging, who follow in the footsteps of their ancestors, those first disciples on the same ground that Jesus and his disciples walked. They are our brothers and sisters and we need to do more to express our solidarity as family with them, through prayer through giving, through pilgrimage.

We too, who call ourselves Christian, are also living stones whom God wants to use in the building of his kingdom.

As Peter writes, ‘So come to him a Living Stone, and like living stones let yourselves be built into a spiritual house.’ 1 Peter 2:4

We can build houses to the glory of God and we with the Order of St Mary, can be stewards and guardians of such buildings for others.

But we recognise with St Peter that God is both the architect and builder of our lives. We are invited to give our lives back to God to let God do the building within us. To be a Christian is not a do-it-yourself job!

‘You are God’s poems’, writes Paul. It is God’s work.

‘You are the clay, God is the potter’ writes Jeremiah. It is God’s work.

‘Our life is in his hands’

Not one of us can imagine the number of people whose lives have already been touched and changed through this building. Not one of us can imagine the number of people whose lives *will* be touched and changed by God *in* this building. The order of Saint Mary will help ensure this will continue to happen for many generations through the grace and mercy of God.

So let us do the building we can do...

and let God do the building in us, that only he can do.

I'll close with a prayer, using words from Psalm 121 that the choir have sung, and applying to them to this place. A prayer for all who come and for all who will come through the doors of this great church.

May the Lord bless your going out and your coming in from this day forth and for evermore. Amen.

+John Stroyan

26th September 2021