

A SERMON PREACHED ON DEDICATION SUNDAY, OCT 2007

By the Revd Michael Freeman

Because opinion Polls are very much in vogue at the moment I recently conducted my version of a Mori Poll to discover if people knew why we celebrate the feast of the Dedication. The result revealed that seventy five per cent of those polled were either uncertain or had no idea. To be quite honest that's rather overstating the case – in fact, I spoke to four people. Three of them have, or have had; close links with St. Mary's, the fourth is a retired Archdeacon of another diocese. I asked them one question; Do you know what this Festival commemorates? The first of the three wondered if it was something to do with the Patronal Festival. The second, a clergyman, looked puzzled, murmured that he wasn't quite sure, but he would look it up and let me know. The archdeacon emeritus laughed and said, "it wasn't his field". However, the fourth person I consulted was spot on and without hesitation, told me that it celebrates the anniversary of the dedication of the church building, and it falls on the actual date, if that is known. If not, as in the case of St. Mary's, the festival is kept on the first Sunday in October.

At the Dedication, the bishop would bless the exterior and the interior of the building, the altar would be consecrated, along with the altar vessels and vestments. And somewhere the Bishop would leave his mark, a cross, usually carved on the outside wall.

I wonder whether the church was rededicated after the fire, but I am assured that this was not the case. But thinking about that, I stood at the nave altar and looked to the east. Beyond the chancel arch lays the Middle Ages. Turn round, to the Georgian nave with its Gothic piers which have been described as being like huge palm trees. To the east, the old order; to the west change. And yet there is an unmistakable continuity.

One could say that most medieval church buildings are symbols of religious continuity; yet at the same time they are evidence of change. Some have undergone structural alteration because of the need to repair or extension – all rather gradual and piecemeal. That would be true of this building until the fire destroyed the nave. The consequence of that was quite dramatic – a completely new style – but a style which was sympathetic to the old as the soaring piers of the nave reflects the perpendicular of the chancel. Change and continuity seem to go hand in hand.

If that is so, that prompts the question for all churchgoers – what was the church building for when it was dedicated? And, more pertinently, what is it for in our day?

First and foremost it was a place of worship – that goes without saying because, as I said earlier, at the dedication the main focus was on the consecration of the altar and all the paraphernalia of sacramental worship. And it remains so to-day – it is pre-eminently a place of worship and prayer.

And when you consider the style of our worship, perhaps our perception is that we always seem to be having to cope with something new – new translations of the Bible, the Alternative Service Book, Common Worship; new hymns, new tunes, the altar moved from the east end to the nave. Yet as time passes the changes don't seem quite as dramatic as we first thought – and we become aware of the continuity – eight o'clock communion and choral evensong according to the Book of Common Prayer; Thomas Tallis and William Byrd are sung alongside Langlais and John Rutter.

Sir Roy Strong, some time Director of the V and A, in a recently published book, has reminded us that churches had other uses apart from worship. Long before the Reformation the parish church was the hub of village life and the festivals and feasts of the church's year provided a focus for community activity. The nave of the parish church doubled up as the village hall – it was a dual-purpose building. And that's how we described St. Nicholas Church when it was re-ordered thirty years ago - nothing new there, then. Again one becomes aware of a link with the past when we think how this building is used to-day – it is once again very much a community building hosting civic and regimental services; school carol services; concerts; participation in the Victorian evening, the arts week and folk festival and today is a prime example - the Pet's Service, the Warwick Words and the Regimental Service.

But St. Mary's was much more than a parish church it was also a place of pilgrimage. It was reputed to house a number of relics and they would undoubtedly have been a strong attraction in an age of superstition. William Field, the minister at the Unitarian Church two hundred years ago, wrote an historical account of Warwick in which he listed the following – part of the chair of the patriarch Abraham; part of the burning bush of Moses; part of the manger in which the infant Jesus was laid, part of the crown of thorns. And most important of all part of the hair of the Blessed Virgin' for it was essential that

there should be a relic of the patron saint of a church in order to encourage pilgrimages – the tourist industry of the medieval world.

And, of course, we still have our pilgrims – though we wouldn't call them such these days – visitors rather – people who come into the church for a variety of reasons – the individuals and families who've a bit of time to fill before going on to the castle, the history groups who arrive for a guided tour, those who have heard that the Beauchamp Chapel is worth a visit. And perhaps most importantly, people who make for the Dean's Chapel to pray, or just to sit still in the quietness.

Well, however we describe them – visitors or pilgrims – we cannot overestimate the importance of the welcome they receive when they walk through the west door. Receptionists, guides, those who work in the shop, flower arrangers, all share in a ministry of welcome so that people feel at ease and, when they leave, they do so, having enjoyed their visit, and hopefully, they take with them the memory of a good experience.

But there is one other feature of life which is linked to the past – the fact that St. Mary's is a collegiate church. Originally that collegiality was restricted to the dean and the canons who serviced not only St. Mary's but also surrounding parishes. But now we all belong to a team ministry, today's - expression of the shared collegiate ministry in which lay people play as important a role as the ordained minister. They take a prominent part in our worship – the choir, servers, readers, intercessors, assistants at the Eucharist. Children and young people are looked after week by week by a group of volunteers. Increasingly lay people share in the pastoral care of parishioners at times of illness and bereavement.

Perhaps it is in the rediscovery of a shared ministry that we are most aware of the continuity with the past for when St. Peter's epistle speaks of a royal priesthood he is speaking of everyone, reminding us that we are all ministers; we all share in that priesthood, we all belong to the team.

When Joseph McCulloch moved the altar in the nave – how long ago? - forty years? What was the reaction? Dismay, outrage, opposition, resignations from the PCC.

Well, I wasn't here at the time and maybe I might have reacted in a similar fashion. But on reflection what Joseph McCulloch did then, was to remind

people of the true nature of worship and ministry. Placing the altar in the nave meant that the main act of the church's worship would take place in the very centre of the congregation, emphasising its corporate nature and that we are all invited to share as participants. Whereas previously, with the celebrant at the high altar, the congregation, in the nave, some thirty yards away, were non-active on lookers. Certainly, the moving of the altar was probably regarded as a move too far for many people, but forty years on, we recognise that it was necessary if we are to be faithful to the vision of the church as described as 'the Body of Christ' – if we are to fulfil our vocation as sharers in a 'team ministry'.

The moving of the altar then highlights the kind of dilemma which we shall face over and over again. We may wish to resist change because we're afraid that we might throw the baby out of the bathwater – yet resistance 'over my dead body' as it were, leads to stagnation. Maybe there are times when we think of continuity and change as being in opposition, and that if we embrace the latter, we have a sense of guilt because we've broken with the past. But the choice is not necessarily either – or – though it maybe at times; but on the whole it's a case of both. To be prepared to embrace change, yet at the same time, being aware of our continuity with the past – provides a necessary balance of our church life.

So what's the answer to the question – what was this building for when it was first dedicated? And what's it for now? The short answer – to be a place of worship and prayer, a centre of the community life, a place of pilgrimage – to be what it has always been from the day of its dedication. And it has remained so because over the centuries, the essential links with the past have been preserved by a willingness to embrace change.

Let me finish with a quotation which has continually hovered at the back of my mind for a long time. It's not about how we use buildings – more about the understanding of the Christian faith and how we share it with other people. But it seems to me to be equally applicable to what I've been talking about.

'Do not try to call people back to where they were, and do not try to call them to where you are, as beautiful as that place might seem to you. You must have the courage to go with them to a place that neither you nor they have ever been before.'