

+In Nomine... Chesterton said that “the Christian ideal has not been tried and found wanting. It has been found difficult; and let untried.” “The world”, he continues, “is full of unfulfilled ideas and uncompleted temples”, for “history does not consist of completed and crumbling ruins, rather it consists of half-built [houses] abandoned by a bankrupt-builder.”

In the last couple of weeks this temple, this house of God has turned into a construction site, a work in progress - not abandoned by a bankrupt-builder but returned to in an ongoing work of construction. The scaffolding now reaches to the very pinnacle of the spire and we are boxed in by chipboard and bubble wrap.

At I say through one of our project meeting last Tuesday, I was reminded that this might have deeper significance. We were discussing the visitor trails that are being developed for the church. There are four of them at the moment, the first, ‘Religion and Change at St Mary’s’, enables visitors to explore how religion informed historical changes through the story this building tells, the second, ‘People of St Mary’s’ - enables visitors to put faces and names to the people who have passed through and worshiped in this building, the third, ‘The University and St Mary’s’ outlines that history and the fourth is ‘Reading the Church’. It was discussing the trail for ‘Reading the Church’ that I was reminded that the physical church can be read as an allegory for the Christian spiritual life.

The font, normally by the door or at the West end of a church marks not only the entrance to the building but the beginning of the Christian journey towards God. We are baptized into hope and into movement towards fellowship with God. The nave, from the latin word for ship, is the vessel in which we journey together towards God, and the altar, traditionally at the East and more recently at the East end of the nave, marks our coming together and our movement towards communion with a God, a God who comes to greet us and enfold us in his love in Jesus Christ. While our visitor trail is not in itself designed as a spiritual journey it reminds us that the building and the liturgies we perform within it are both symbolic of our movement towards God. They remind us that Christianity is an idea in the process of fulfillment, a temple in construction, both in terms of our individual spirituality and in terms of our corporate identity. The Christian ideal may be found difficult, but it is because of this we keep returning to it, keep trying.

Our reading from the book of Kings takes us back to the building of the temple in Jerusalem, the first permanent dwelling place for God after his peripatetic camping out in the wilderness. In a nice little side note we are told that “The house was built with stone finished at the quarry, so that neither hammer nor axe nor any tool of iron was heard in the temple while it was being built.” I can assure you that this is not the case with our temple - (but) we are much more comfortable with being in construction. Brian noted this week that although we are going to try and window dress some of the construction, we actually don't want to pretty everything up and pretend nothing is happening around us. I think this expresses that same comfort with being a work in progress. In a sense, our temple is always a work in progress because through Christ we now recognize that the dwelling of God with us is also always a work in progress. We are temples of the Holy Spirit Paul says, and the Spirit of God which dwells within us is our loving movement towards God and towards our neighbor. The Spirit of God dwelling within us is a work in progress toward peace, towards love, towards reconciliation. Our spiritual lives are works in progress that we return to again and again and so we need to be comfortable with our souls being construction sites.

In the last couple of weeks Rachel and I have been performing a number of house blessings, with a simple little rite and a lot of holy water. The blessing of our individual homes is a way of allowing us to see our living spaces as God might see them. Blessing something allows it to show or manifest something of what it truly is, of what its proper end is, and hopefully we are then enabled to inhabit that blessing, to fulfill it, and so to genuinely make our houses places of peace for example.

In this season of Epiphany we focus on the different ways in which God manifests himself to humanity, at the Wedding in Cana Jesus performs his first miracle, and makes manifest something of his divinity to the disciples. Throughout this season though we are also being asked the question - how do *we* show God in our lives? How is God manifest in what we say and in what we do and in who we are? As a parish, as a church community we might find help in answering this question by returning to our 'Reading the Church' visitor trail.

The trail as currently conceived starts under the tower, the tower which points upwards towards the transcendence of God and is crowned with that symbol of the resurrection, the rooster, which crows at the rising of the sun. The tower and spire are powerful visual symbols proclaiming the

Christian faith and welcoming people to the building, inviting them to encounter God in this place. The tower then is a good place for our trail to start because it is both an entrance and an exit, a place of welcome and a place of proclamation and sending out. A big part of this construction project is about extending our ministry of welcome to the thousands of visitors who come to this building. However everyone who comes here leaves, and we hope in some small way they leave transformed by their experience, or even blessed by it.

On the steps up to the Radcliffe square there is a verse from Psalm 121 which says quite a lot I think about how we hope to manifest God in the world, it goes: 'the Lord guard your going out and your coming in.' We are a church that stands between the intellectual world of the university and the spiritual world of the church universal, between the secular world of contemporary society and the sacred world of Christian faith and practice. For us as a church encouraging both that coming in and going out is hugely important and the conversations that happen on the steps, so to speak, are one of the most important parts of our mission and the way in which we try and show something of the generosity and love of a welcoming God.

Our liturgy here on a Sunday morning makes explicit the kind of blessing we hope everyone who visits the church has at least a glimmer of. At the end of our service we receive a blessing in the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit, a blessing which encapsulates the gift of salvation which is our fellowship with God. Then, following the blessing the deacon says 'Go in peace to love and serve the Lord', to which we reply 'In the name of Christ, Amen.' In the liturgy itself, through communion with one another and with God, we are reminded of the peace God gives us, and not just reminded, we are actually given that peace again, we are reconciled, forgiven, made whole. In the work of progress that is our spiritual lives, our visit to the church and the liturgy we have performed in it, returns us to our beginning and end in God, they transform us and bring us back into fellowship with God so that God may dwell in us anew. Then, in the name of Christ we *can* leave, in peace, committed again to manifest that blessing in the complicated messy construction sites of our lives. May you be blessed in that endeavor and may all who visit this church leave with a glimmer of God's blessing.