

Easter 5
22/05/2011

Mark the Evangelist

Acts 7:55-60
Psalm 31
I Peter 2:2-10
John 14:1-14

Cracked churches and living stones

“The bell tower has collapsed, the porch is dilapidated the walls are cracked. The vicar says the church needs new prayer books and the people complain the times are hard.” Is this a report on our own church and congregation? No. It is a report on a little church in Scawton, Yorkshire, not far from Ampleforth Abbey, written in 1882. The church’s history goes back to the 12th Century when the church was a pioneer ministry of a different Abbey nearby. The church is currently being revived by the monks of Ampleforth as part of their pattern of outreach. People of living faith are making a derelict church look like a place of life once more.

The reason for the negative report quoted is that from 1828 to 1882 the incumbent of Scawton did not live there. He was Master of Downing College in Cambridge – hence the decay. The report reads as a good example of what the current Heritage Council of Victoria describes as “demolition by neglect”. But more than the building was let slip during these years. The Master of Downing College did not minister in Scawton, and the congregation was allowed to grow weak as well. [Martin Warner, *Church Times*, 17/05/2011]

It may be a mistake to make too strong a link between the fabric of a church building and the quality of the worshipping life of a congregation. We know that a building may be pristine, but the mission may be dead. On the other hand, a congregation that is truly made up of living stones, built solidly on Christ the corner stone does not live for itself alone. It will seek to reflect what it knows of the glory of God in the quality of its spiritual life as well as the structures within which it chooses express its mission. Christian faith is not ideology. It is about the transformation of the world, in response to God’s transformation of Jesus from death to life. That means the church is meant to be a place of life, not of death; a place of growth in the good gifts of God. If faith is truly incarnate amongst us, it is fair to suggest the church should look as though it is alive, not dead.

Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals, yet chosen and precious in God’s sight, and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God in Christ. (1 Peter 2:4-5)

In these rich words, Peter translates architectural imagery into relational imagery. For him stones are not a random pile of rocks. Nor are they cold, hard death-like things as in a modern Temple, such as a house of commerce in the city. In Peter the stones belong to a human structure built on Christ: a Temple through which worship is offered to God on the pattern of Jesus Christ who engenders inspiring relationships rather than death, loss or impersonal transactions in cold hard cash. In Peter’s Letter stones are people; living vessels of holiness who stand in a lively communal relationship with one another and with Christ, the central, sustaining presence of the community.

That is why Peter also says the church is “a holy priesthood” that offers spiritual sacrifices. An alternative translation would be “a royal residence”. The community that has been brought into life by Christ is home for God who dwells where the people are gathered, where bread and wine is shared in an active, celebrating, serving community. But this life is not given to be kept for ourselves. The gift that enlivens the Temple of the Living God is meant to be passed on to others by showing forth in word and deed in the community around it, the presence of Jesus Christ. Even when death and sacrifice are recalled in this community, it is done so not for the purpose of remembering loss, but for remembering the gift of life that is grounded in the goodness and mercy of God.

During the Easter season the readings point to the way in which resurrection life continued to transform the lives of many people. The disciples who had been riddled with fear, guilt and grief became bold and outspoken and risked themselves for Christ. The life-changing faith spread but not without opposition as Stephen’s speech and death in Acts shows. He was stoned to death but as we saw, he was revealed to be a living stone related to the cornerstone who, standing at the right hand of God, had brought him over into new life. The martyrdom of Stephen was the first of many faithful deaths in the style of Christ that became deeds of witness and sources of new life for the church.

The fabric of our church buildings may provide the setting for the church’s witness to the world, but that is not enough. Unless with our voices and our deed the risen Christ speaks through our lives, the buildings we inhabit will be tombs of death, not temples to resurrection life. [Martin Warner, *ibid*].

The only way a community can be at mission is if it allows itself to be nourished by God. Peter urges his audience to seek the pure spiritual milk of the word so that it may grow strong in faith. Peter uses the sense of a baby, craving for its mother’s breast as a way of urging the church to feed on the nourishing food God provides in the gospel of Jesus Christ, expressed in word and sacrament, if it wishes to grow into a mature, strong and wise community that truly serves God in the world.

God calls us all to crave the food that can truly give us life, and to sit and eat; to be joined in relationship with those who share this bread and this wine, which represent Jesus’ life-giving presence amongst us. Every time we share this meal we re-present the wonderful deeds of the Easter Story in which we hear again how God takes what is despised [a stone rejected] and makes it into something glorious [a corner stone, chosen of God and precious]. There is a pattern here. Out of hiddenness and brokenness, new life is born. There is nothing esoteric or optional about this, it is the core of our community life, the core of our worship, the core of our faith and the reason we are at mission in the world. For these are God’s marvellous deeds, by which we have been drawn out of darkness, into the light of life. Thanks be to God.
