

SMF Festival 2024

Sermon by the Rt Revd John Ford, formerly Bishop of The Murray

Rev 21: 9-14 and Matthew 21: 12-16

He showed me the holy city coming down out of heaven from God. Rev 21:10

Maximus the Confessor writing in the early 7th century tells us that it isn't the architect's plans which dictate how the final building will look. Rather it is the vision in the architect's mind of how it will look when finished ... this dictates the plans and construction. God has a vision of what things will be like - when finished.

Carrying on in v11 ... 'having the glory of God' - precisely because of its heavenly origin, it reflects the divine glory. Accordingly, if the Church is to remain faithful to the vision, the plans, the skill in construction and maintenance over 2000 years, then the age of beige should be over and our lives and our witness must be characterised by colour and vitality. Why? Because we are called to live in the divine radiance which reflects the very glory of God - immortal, invisible, the one only wise, in light inaccessible, hid from our eyes ... but glimpsed by humans who have eyes to see, hearts to learn and wills to be changed.

All built heritage has connection with the prevailing culture. It reflects the present trend and, at its best, directs human experience towards a future. How such architectural developments are received varies. One doesn't have to move far from here to find examples of buildings that have evoked various responses.

As we gather today at a Mass 'for the Dedication of a Church' we are reminded that this Society was started with the expressed aim, 'to promote and maintain catholic teaching and practice within the Church of England'. To contribute towards the life, growth and mission of the Church - the mystical Body of Christ - in accordance with the Catholic Faith.

What might that mean today ... now. How can it be that the Church is an effective sign, instrument and foretaste of the colourful glory and vital life of the Godhead? It is tempting to start with what might need demolishing - and not so much in our built heritage! Things that might be described as barnacles on, or destructive to, the understood architect's vision. Places to start might be with the buildings - which, after all, must reflect the nature and purpose of the mystical Body - probably their internal design, lay out, use. There have been additions or adaptations, developments and destructions to and within the mystical Body and its buildings for all our history.

Let us be honest. Patronage is exercised in all kinds of ways and by people and organisations some of which are identifiable and others rather shadowy and hidden. SMF is public, straightforward, in plain sight and operates within the current rules. Let's also be honest and acknowledge that there are plenty of brutalist architects

around. And there are a lot of 'modernist' developers that like to spin together attractive presentations with excellent superficial decoration, but no substance. All of these add to or subtract from that which has been received. Even SMF has done so – founded in the second ritualist phase of anglo-catholicism – surely that took things away and didn't add anything!

How then to maintain the faith ... revealed in the Holy Scriptures ... set forth in the creeds ... and witnessed to by our common life? And thus revitalise the communities of faith served by SMF ... for unless that is our aim then we are not being catholic Christians – it is as simple as that! It is as true as that, and as urgent as that.

We are told (Acts 2:42) that the first followers of Jesus remained faithful to: the teaching of the Apostles, the breaking of the bread, the fellowship and the prayers. These I equate with four 'c' words (well three plus a 'k' but it sounds like a 'c'!) – catechesis, communion, koinonia and conversation. And then they each can be related to the building up of the Corpus Christi. Catechesis is the concrete, essential for a solid foundation. Communion is the cement that binds everything together. Koinonia is the clay from which each living stone is made and, when combined, builds up the whole and conversation is the way in which the whole structure is constructed and developed.

Concrete of the foundation = teaching of the apostles, in Bible, creeds and Councils. Every parish has to be committed to the notion of all age learning! None of us is fully catechised and we all need to grow in the faith of the apostles. To say a resounding Yes to the deposit of faith and be prepared to submit to it, however inconvenient it might be and counter cultural it certainly is. One of the big issues of today is a general unwillingness to accept that anything is a given and a reluctance to leave open the possibility that we are each called to grow into the fullness of the faith. To long for teaching that is clear and authoritative ... and, where it is absent, to call for it. 'I don't believe that!' Doesn't mean it isn't true!!!

For it is not the 'I' but the 'we' of koinonia, the fellowship = us being built into, being made ready for ... what? Heaven, of course. Individually and collectively, the living stones are to be formed and shaped for eternity. This is an adventure! The future is enticing, attractive and deeply mysterious. For now, the best way to think about that is to say that I must become more like Jesus. Not just love him ... but love like him! We are the clay, and the Master builder will form us into the eternal Temple ... if only we will allow him. But it is a collective formation – it has ecumenical dimensions, the koinonia is of all who claim the name of Jesus. It would be a perversion of the catholic faith if this is ignored or denied. The decoration applied to the clay is superficial – it is how each piece is shaped, by whom and for what – that is of the very essence. Is the parish a school for heaven?

All being held together – in communion – by the gift of communion. The Corpus Christi feeds the Corpus Christi so that the Corpus Christi can be him in the world.

And by being him in the world we are formed and shaped together – in communion, a necessary and theological essential for the heavenly Temple. It is the cement that binds us. A preponderance of sand in cement makes it go further – it expands it and makes it spreadable. But it eventually crumbles and stops holding things together. The cement of communion binds God’s holy people into One. The one Lord who we receive from this altar; the one who resides in the Tabernacle and gives himself afresh at every Mass makes us One and it is incumbent upon catholic Christians to make that unity a visible reality. Unity is in communion and koinonia and is fudged by the use of any other descriptor.

It is given as we are being built = constructed by holy conversation ... by a life of prayer and service – not a prayer life but one life all concerned with holy conversation – a dialogue with the Father, in the Son by the guidance and inspiration of the Spirit. A parish that prays ... stays. A rather, remains or abides. Because prayer takes us on a journey deep into the love of the Godhead – it is the life blood of the Body. The promptings that begin it and the will to continue in it ... these are the outpourings of the Spirit without whose gift we are unable to begin.

“The radiance ... (of the new Jerusalem) ... like a jasper, clear as crystal ...” Refracting the glory of God in an explosion of glory and life ... the age of beige should and could be over! And SMF should be a colour artist!