Sermon: St John the Evangelist Patronal Festival 2020

Over the last month and a bit whilst we have been in lockdown, and whilst we have all been locked out of our churches, I have been giving some thought to the theology of place and buildings. Up until now, my thinking was very much that although places and buildings can have significance and invoke memories for us as individuals, they do not, in and of themselves, have a theology to them. I would have (and have) argued that Church is the people not the buildings, falling in line with the Archbishops’ guidance and their reasoning for closing and locking us all out.

However, my reflections have led me to a more nuanced understanding. Yes, the Church must always be the people. Without people who believe in God the Holy Trinity and that salvation is through faith in Jesus Christ and the victory he won over sin and death by his death and resurrection, the Church is just a glorified social club with people who have rather strange rituals, customs, music, and wardrobes! But the Church is more than just people. We have these wonderful buildings designed, funded, built, and cared for by generations of the faithful, past and present, to enable us to come into God’s presence in holy wonder and worship. These buildings are a theological gift of sacrifice, prayer, and praise from former generations to this and to generations to come. These buildings lift our hearts to the halls of heaven where, every so often, we glimpse the face of God; where the veil between heaven and earth is thin; where angels dance and minister (predominantly unseen) in our presence. Our buildings are important!

And as I look now at an empty church I am deeply sad as our distance is painful. But I am also incredibly proud and thankful. Proud of the people of this Parish who, on hearing Christ’s call to follow him, have worshipped him here and will continue to do so when we are allowed. Proud of those who have, and continue to labour to build and adorn this house of prayer to God’s glory; their blood, sweat, gifts, and prayers are the foundations on which this building stands. Proud of each of you who are isolating at the moment and the courage, restraint, care, and compassion that is being displayed in our community as we try to live as resurrection people in the face of sadness, death, and uncertainty. Thankful for the love and support, fellowship, and friendliness by which our congregations are known. Thankful, that as yet, I have not been required to commend any of our number into care and protection of almighty God at your funerals as a result of this devastating virus.

Today, as I offer Eucharist once again in our Parish Church, I am all too aware of these strange times. The church looks empty but it isn’t. It is filled with your prayers and it is filled with your faces. Thankfully you all nearly always sit in the same place, so I can see Marion sitting on the front row, Sally-Anne and Fr Rex about 5 rows back, Grant towering over Maureen and his children, Graham in the sanctuary, Dee and Andy and a host of children in the south aisle, the choir in the stalls and the usual latecomers dodging the entrance procession as they make their way to their seats! The church is not empty because you are the Church and this is your church – a place where you should always be welcome.

Last year, on this Patronal Sunday, I spoke of our Parish needing to follow in path of St John as someone who proclaimed the love, light, and life of Jesus Christ. These three themes have been adopted by the PCC and underpin all our efforts. During these dark days of pandemic let us continue, in word and deed, to proclaim the Good News of Jesus Christ and his love for all people; let us live his risen life and embody his message of forgiveness for all people in our community; let us take the light of Christ that was set on fire in our hearts at baptism and illuminate the path for those who are walking in darkness, despair and hopelessness. As believers in the Word of life, our risen Lord, let our proclamation always be…

Alleluia! Christ is risen.

He is risen indeed. Alleluia!