

Sunday 4 May 2008: Sunday after Ascension

Stay in the city and wait for the power from on high

Readings: Acts 1.6-14, John 17.1-11

“You will receive power when the Holy Spirit comes upon you; and you will be my witnesses in Jerusalem, in all Judea and Samaria, and to the ends of the earth.” (Acts 1.8)

On Thursday we celebrated Ascension Day and the very stones of these buildings seemed to witness to Christ risen, ascended, glorified. The departing Jesus told the disciples to stay in the city until they were clothed with power from on high. So today, we wait in our city for the gift of God’s Holy Spirit and we are pleased to be joined by neighbours and friends from the local amenity societies, Westminster’s Churches Together and the Westminster Faith Exchange.

Today, we are also beginning the second week of the Festival to celebrate and give thanks for the renewal of St Martin’s. For the regulars, this morning’s sermon is something of a reprise but I hope it gathers together some of what we have learned on the way.

On 20th October 1726 the Vicar, The Revd Dr Zechariah Pearce, preached at the dedication of this church. The congregation was so taken by the sermon that the Vestry arranged for it to be printed in an expanded form. A few years ago, Nick Danks, our Director of Music, found a copy in the Cambridge University library and photocopied it for me. By modern standards it was an exceedingly long sermon but it means we know just what our predecessors thought they were doing when they built this church.

As his text, the then Vicar took the story in the book of Genesis chapter 28, about Jacob dreaming of a ladder with its feet on the ground and reaching up into heaven and angels ascending and descending upon it. When Jacob awoke from sleep he said, “Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it... How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven.”

Using all that was known about temples in ancient, classical, Biblical and their own times, this church represented the summation of human knowledge on the subject. St Martin’s is a classic church of the ‘enlightenment’: the product of careful scholarship, light, open and, in some ways, a very democratic building in which it was possible for everyone to hear and see wherever they were standing. (Only the pews in the gallery date from the 1720’s, the box pews at the side are 1750’s and the pews most of you are sitting in are 1799, originally the height of the pews at the back but cut down twice to their present level in the nineteenth century).

Dr Pearce was also articulate that this church was the best London could offer to God. They had used the top craftsmen. St Martin’s Lane and Covent Garden was then the centre for some of the finest furniture makers in Europe – this pulpit, for example, or slightly later, the Minister’s chair, or the two chairs in what was the Royal pew, which have now been restored. The architect, James Gibbs brought two of the greatest Italian plasterers across Europe from Italy, Attari and Bagguti, to create this marvellous ceiling. And shortly after the church opened, probably in the 1730’s, the painting of St Martin and the beggar by Solimena, which has been on loan to the National Gallery for the last few years but which will now be coming back, was carried from Naples and found it’s

home here. You can see the original wall painting of which our picture is a version in the Monastery of St Martin, now a museum, in Naples. One of our Churchwardens, Andrew Caspari, and his family visited it a few weeks ago.

In the earliest stages of our trying to understand these buildings, Jane Clark was the bursar in the Social Care Unit and she was terminally ill. Her husband, Brian, is an architect and Jane had a tutored eye for buildings. She commented that in the 1720's they knew about capital investment and weren't afraid of it. For me that was a really helpful remark from the person in charge of the Social Care Unit's finances, pointing to the possible marriage of that early eighteenth century aesthetic tradition with the twentieth century ethical tradition with which we are so much more familiar.

In Eric Parry's Renewal of St Martin's, now nearing completion, we have beautiful, inspiring, but practical rooms that will equip this place for service in the twenty-first century. There has been a lot of comment on the quality of architecture and finishes and that this project is for the whole community to use in our work with street homeless people and the Chinese community centre, as well as education and meeting rooms for church, and a fine music rehearsal room. This is the best London can offer to God in our day. It has involved workers from across the country – glass from Wells in Somerset and benches and choir stalls from North Yorkshire; as well as glass and steel from Germany, Switzerland and Spain; an east window by an Iranian artist based in London; and financial contributions from around the world, particularly Hong Kong and the USA. A woman came into the shop on Friday and said she had been in Perth in Western Australia on Monday and heard our historic bells, now in the Swan bell tower, ringing a Quarter Peal to celebrate our buildings renewal here in London.

Ours is a smaller world than in the 1720's. It is also a more fragile world, or at least it feels so. I don't suppose building anything is environmentally friendly because of the huge commitment of resources, but we have taken a lot of trouble to be energy efficient and have taken the long view in opting for quality and making a capital investment that will last. The Bishop of London has mounted a very serious challenge to all the churches in the Diocese to find ways of reducing the amount of energy they use. So, for example, we have drilled 150 metres down to the London aquifer to draw and return water in an exchange that will heat and cool the buildings.

In the last 20 years Trafalgar Square has undergone a major renewal. First the commercial buildings on the south side, then the diplomatic buildings, South Africa House and Canada House, then the layout of the Square itself, one of the legacies of Ken Livingstone's time as Mayor, and the National and National Portrait Galleries. Last of all, in an ordering that establishes the priorities of our own time, St Martin's, the building around which John Nash originally organised the Square. We want to speak well for God in the heart of our city in a way that matters to the Church at large. Simon Jenkins' article in Friday's Guardian was headed, "Even an atheist can marvel at this exquisite refuge for the urban poor" and went on to say that, "The comfort given to all in the gloriously restored St Martin-in-the-Fields shows how the church excels in unofficial welfare" and identified this as a model to be found in some of the poorest parts of Britain. The churches and faith communities are still present in our cities as no other group. "Stay in the city and wait to be clothed with the power from on high."

The prime gift of the Spirit at Pentecost was communication. In a reverse of the confusion created at Babel, people in Jerusalem speaking diverse languages experienced something like a strong wind blowing, or tongues of fire – high, change-making energy - and understood one another.

How to communicate with understanding in our diverse, fragile and small world is very pressing. Religion, so evidently part of the problem, must also be part of the solution.

The terrorist attack on 9/11 2001 was the first of a series of occasions when we held services which involved a Rabbi and an Imam. This was not “multi-faith worship” but a hospitable Christian church respecting and welcoming difference. West London Synagogue’s Rabbi Mark Winer said, “It does not help me if you hold back from telling me who you are out of some misconceived politeness. It helps me when you say as clearly as you can why you are a Christian or Muslim or whatever, so that we can discover what we have in common and where we differ. That’s a good example of why the mission statement of St Martin’s is, “to honour God and enable questioning, open-minded people to discover for themselves the significance of Jesus Christ.” In Christ I see God. This and every church witnesses to him and we try to do so in such a way as to respect difference and enable all who enter here to discover for themselves his significance.

In the second half of the twentieth century something happened between the Christian churches so that we ceased to see ourselves as competitors in opposition to each other and realised we are on the same side. In Westminster, a very significant part of that local process was when a small group of people committed to pray in silence together at the shrine of St Edward in Westminster Abbey. I’m not sure where similar shared sacred space exists between the different faith communities but I do wonder if we should be doing something similar, as we experienced in a small way last November on Justthisday, when a large number of the faith groups gathered here to keep just a few minutes silence together and experienced unity *and* diversity.

“Stay in the city and wait for the power from on high.” Cities of their nature are diverse with competing world views alongside one another. We are incomplete without each other in the highest human search for God in the midst of us.