

Sunday 12 March 2006: The Second Sunday of Lent

Building Community: Educating ourselves about the places we're in

Readings: Genesis 17. 1-7, 15-16; Mark 8. 31-end

I was intrigued by a central/controlling image in the briefing notes which Rosemary (Lain-Priestly) sent me. David, just before his epic fight with Goliath, took off Saul's armour because it was so heavy he couldn't move in it. Freed of its cumbersome weight, even though now less guarded, less protected, he could choose the right weapon to achieve his ends. Hence the catapult and the five smooth stones.

Both the title of this Series (Building Community) and that core image seem laced, oozing, with irony. The word "building" leads the field – two years on a building site, sixteen weeks amongst the street homeless, millions of pounds needed and then – by a wonderful alchemy – a spick and span, fit-for-purpose, beautified, titivated hey-presto building, to be opened no doubt by a Grand Figure with fanfares and oodles of champagne. All that to look forward to. I wish you well. And I hope, I really do, that you won't end up with the equivalent of Saul's armour – something altogether too heavy and awkward to wear, something that limits your choice, makes you less adaptable, dulls your spirit, diminishes your flair.

It's a question that faces us at Wesley's Chapel all the time. Grade One Listed, inside and out, that's what we are; a prime example of Georgian simplicity **and** Victorian pomposity, a community moving from being a society to becoming a church, on into its mahogany phase, full of airs but, if we're not careful, too few graces. How easy it would be to content ourselves with aesthetics, with grandeur, with status.

St Martin's and Wesley's Chapel have all that in common. Readings from Scripture like those we've heard this morning, (Genesis 17: 1-7 and 15-16 and Mark 8: 31 – end) are in-your-face for anyone likely to be seduced by buildings.

Abraham has been called to leave the city he's always lived in and head off for distant Canaan. His obedience, faith, courage are stunning. He puts the familiar behind him; the unknown stretches out ahead of him.

In the Gospel reading, Peter actually rebukes Jesus for suggesting that **his** road is also into unknown realms, a dark road that seems to plunge into suffering and even death. But Jesus withstands Peter's rebuke – puts the challenge back to him – anyone contemplating the life he (Jesus) offers must face the need for self-denial, be ready to carry a cross and follow him along that same darksome path. The desire for a few of life's comforts to be exercised in its bleaker moments, a sense of security, to be surrounded by the familiar, just has to be put on one side. What does it profit anyone if they gain the whole world at the cost of their true self? What can they give to buy that self back again?

What questions to be haunted by as we rip up floorboards, bring in the bags of cement, put in new electrical systems; as we surround ourselves with architects, contractors, clerk of works; as we put on our hard hats for the hard slog of refurbishment. We don't want to be building bigger and better barns, so just how **do** we educate ourselves for discipleship? How do we avoid the Scylla of an obsession with grandiose buildings and the Charybdis of a repetitive fundraising syndrome?

Let me tell you in a few sentences how we try to handle these questions a Wesley's Chapel – for your questions are, in smaller measure, ours too.

I invoke the spirit of the Foundery – that ruinous pile that preceded the 1778 building we now have. Wesley was too busy spreading the word, travelling the length and breadth of these islands, to have the luxury of building himself a grand temple. For 39 years Methodism was headquartered in a build whose roof leaked. But in this decrepit building, under that leaking roof, there developed:

- A ragged school
- A ministry to those on death row
- A revolving loan fund
- A primary health care system
- A place for the poorest and most destitute
- A laying of the ghost of the followers of Calvin
- The preaching of a gospel of grace to all: the lost, the last, the lowest, the least

The Foundery didn't offer a ministry of jasper pillars, oak pews, mahogany pulpit. Yet it continues to hover over us all; that's where our ethos was formed, given its colours and its shape; that's where our commitment to go not to those who need us but to those who need us most was hammered out. That's what we keep in the forefront of our mind.

You've had Kings and Queens, artists and architects, the great and the good around this place across the centuries. Also, I'm relieved to note, a highwayman, a courtesan and a rake or two. But the opening of the crypt in Dick Sheppard's time to the hundreds of soldiers coming back from France, your dialogue with the worlds of learning and the arts, your prophetic stance against the evils of apartheid stamped this site with a ministry no amount of modernisation, embellishment, refurbishment, or re-ordering can or ought to remove. You must not move back into your spanking new premises only to find they've become as heavy and as restricting as Saul's armour.

This is a lodging place, a resting place, a base. Armed with our small smooth stones, ready to deny ourselves, we'll send out our giant-slayers, men and women ready at a moment's notice to face the Goliath of Greed, Giant Despair, Monstrous Injustice, hobgoblins and foul friends and things that go bump in the night – ready to take up our cross and face all such ogres, face them down, pit our littleness against their bulk, and follow the way of mercy, pity, peace and love, the way of Jesus.

That's who you are.

That's what this place is to be.

That's how you build community.

That's how you follow Jesus.

Perhaps one day you'll invite me back – when the Grand Figure has done his/her stuff and the fanfares are silent, the champagne finished. And we'll see just how we're getting on with the real work of serving our present age.

Amen.