

A Signpost to Glory

150th Anniversary of All Souls, Haley Hill, Halifax

Sunday 6 September 2009

As the train slowly snakes its way into the platform, recovering its energies after the one hundred and seventy five miles an hour it has been travelling for much of its course, it comes to a halt in a uniquely remarkable place. Standing beneath William Barlow's vast train shed (completed in 1868), with a span of two hundred and fifty feet, at the time the largest single span roof in the world, the carriages rest on what was the roof of the great brewery dray store, now punctured by the escalators leading to shops and much else. Passengers finally emerge through surely the most remarkable riot of neo-Gothic pinnacles of any secular building. I am describing, of course, Eurostar depositing its passengers at London's Saint Pancras Station.

If Saint Pancras was Gilbert Scott's greatest secular building, a cathedral of steam, a railway shrine, then All Souls Haley Hill is perhaps the crowning glory of all his many churches – certainly he believed it to be his best. Scott was an unusual man by any standards. His prodigious energy was legend. The Foreign Office in Whitehall, the Albert Memorial in Kensington and countless churches were all of his design. Indeed his over-production inspired legendary tales about him.

He asks admiringly of one church only to be told it is his own. Critically surveying a church under construction and pointing to engineering faults, he is gently instructed that this is not his building – it's further down the road. Maybe this explains something of the tragic design fault here at Haley Hill, where a chemical reaction between two different types of stone played such havoc and led to the church's closure in the 1970s.

But Scott was remarkable too in that his industry and imagination was inspired by his faith. He remained a loyal Anglican and profoundly religious throughout his life. His autobiography movingly catalogues the hopes and fears, achievements and tragedies of his life – all of this is drawn out on a canvas of Christian faith which energised and inspired all that he did.

His passion for gothic architecture sprang from his desire that churches should reach up to the heavens and speak of the glory of God. All Souls could not speak more clearly.

But can we leave it there? After all, in the end the building also had its tragic story to tell. What anyway should we say of such extravagant buildings and the desire to construct them? Let us glance back at the scriptures we've heard read. Jeremiah, that most uncomfortable of Old Testament prophets, writes:

'... if you will not heed these words, I swear by myself, says the Lord, that this house shall become a desolation ... Many nations will pass by ... and all of them will say: "Why has the Lord dealt in this way with that great city?"

And they will answer, "Because they abandoned the covenant of the Lord their God, and worshipped other Gods and served them." They are tough words and cannot be ignored. Having given fifteen years of my life to cathedrals, I know just how seductive great churches can be, becoming, as the prophet implies, idols that take our eyes from God. But in all this, scripture as in much else displays a subtle ambivalence. For listen to the end of that gospel passage heard:

'You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hidden.'

All Souls speaks to this text uniquely. However in 1979 it felt more like 'the house of desolation' described by Jeremiah. It was only through the commitment of some visionary people and the

imagination of the Church's Conservation Trust that this great building survives. But that may be insufficient in itself.

When I first entered this church – perhaps four or five years ago, I could still feel the impulse of Jeremiah: 'Why has the Lord dealt in this way?' It led me back both then and since to Gilbert Scott and indeed to Colonel Akroyd who commissioned the building of the church. Both here and elsewhere Scott's faith did not stop at the construction of a great building. Throughout England he was involved in constructing one building after another aimed at bringing social improvement to the poor. Akroydon, still set out around us was one of those early examples like Saltaire, and then later Bournville, Port Sunlight and New Earswick in York. They were model villages designed by those who, inspired by faith, wanted to work for a healthier society, a better world.

Today we celebrate the glory of this amazing building, but we dare not stop there. The challenge to us now is perhaps greater than ever before. This morning I presided at what was effectively the requiem for the tiny continuing Christian community that started here in 1859. Both that service and this one cry out to us: 'How can this place again be a signpost to the glory of God and the coming of the kingdom?' Even Akroydon itself challenges us similarly. What are we as a wider secular community and also as Christians in Halifax to do to make this building speak once again.

It is a challenge we dare not flout or duck. Just as Saint Pancras lives again as a breathtaking building, so can All Souls. All that has been poured into this place means that God must still be glorified and his kingdom of justice and righteousness be established. That is the challenge. It begins this afternoon – who will work with me, I wonder, to re-establish that vision?

Amen.

Readings:

Jeremiah 22. 1-17

Matthew 5. 1-16