

## Have You Not Known?

St John, Carlton

Rededication Mass

Third Before Lent, Sunday 8 February 2009

During my time at theological college, the authorities there had a huge clear out. No, it wasn't students they cleared out but largely surplus china. There had been commissioned china with the college shield, monogram and motto – serving plates, dinner plates and all the rest. The most coveted pieces, however, which provoked the highest bids were a collection of china chamber pots. These fine and elegant vessels were all autographed with the college motto: *Guard the Deposit!* There – I thought we needed an early start.

Now whether these sacred vessels went back to the college's foundations in 1854 I have no way of knowing. If they were, however, then almost certainly they would have been designed by the architect himself who designed everything down to the door hinges, finger plates and key hole frames. Indeed, in my time, one of the fine robust three-legged tables from a student room went on display at the Victoria and Albert Museum, part of an exhibition of Victorian architecture and art. The architect was none other than George Edmund Street, the designer of this most gritty and magnificent church.

Street was one of the doyens of Victorian architects and designers along with Gilbert Scott, G. F. Bodley – who worked at Cawthorne – and John Loughborough Pearson who extended our cathedral. Probably Street's most famous work is the Royal Courts of Justice in the Strand in London, a feast of gothic. It is very good to have our Diocesan Chancellor here this morning to represent the legal profession who inhabit the Royal Courts.

But it was churches for which Street was most famous – 179 Anglican churches alone. The Crimean Church in Istanbul, Anglican churches in Rome and countless other commissions. When it came to churches, Street's faith and aesthetic instincts were inseparable. His general preference for thirteenth century Gothic, beautifully exemplified here in Carlton, resonated with the mystery of God in all his transcendence. That transcendence of God who is beyond even what we can imagine is captured powerfully for us by the prophet in that reading from Isaiah:

'Have you not known? Have you not heard? Has it not been told you from the beginning? Have you not understood from the foundation of the earth? It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers, who stretch out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in.'

Here the prophet even uses design and architectural images. Elsewhere we read of God setting in place the 'vault of heaven'. This is the architecture of our existence.

Street's architecture is subtle and also in its own way transcendent. The wooden and stone tunnel vaulting of the tower space and chancel mirror the vault of heaven. The saddleback tower and the spires and pinnacles, for which he is famous elsewhere, point us away from ourselves to the God whom we worship, the God who gives himself away.

So today we come to worship, and to honour Street's genius, his vision, and his immersion in the Spirit of God. But we come too to *rededicate*, to give thanks for this re-furbished organ and for the new community space. So along with the transcendent we root ourselves in the humanity in which Christ came to dwell. I began in an earthly manner-advisedly! Chamber pots and serving plates are as much part of our existence too. Both the gospel and Paul's letter to the Corinthians remind us of this sharply.

So Jesus heals Simon's mother-in-law and many others who are sick. He also earths the gospel of God in a real theology and spirituality of place:

‘ “Go on to the next towns, that I may preach there also ...” And he went throughout all Galilee, preaching in the synagogues’.

That is what this building is about. It speaks of God's presence in this place; it acts as a gathering place for the Church; it is a glorious space in which to offer the liturgy, to respond to God's grace. It is a sacramental space and a sacramental sign in God's world – it speaks to all.

This fine building is now better equipped still to offer such a witness to all in this area. We give thanks to Father John, to the churchwardens and all who made it possible. But most of all we give thanks to God in Jesus Christ. We are called still to ‘guard the deposit of faith’ and we are called to live it for others.

We and they are offered the crown of faith. In the prophet's words:

‘We shall mount up with wings like eagles, we shall run and not be weary, we shall walk and not faint.’

Amen

Readings:

Isaiah 40. 21 – end

I Corinthians 9. 16-23

Mark 1. 29-39