

SEASONS OF THE SPIRIT : CHURCH**JUNE 12TH 2002**

A third century Christian writer could say ‘we have no temples; we have no altars’, because Christians themselves are the living stones of the New Temple, inspired by the Holy Spirit. And yet from a very early period Christians did begin building purpose built places set aside for worship, beginning with the simple basilica, which in turn developed into the multi-spaced high medieval church with its many altars and rich decoration.

Today our theme is that of ‘Church’ and through words and music we shall reflect on the meaning of these physical spaces which are so much a part of the English landscape woven into the texture of national and local life, viewed mostly with affection, sometimes with indifference, repositories of mystery and contradiction; ‘Our churches,’ as John Betjeman memorably said, ‘are our history shown, In wood and glass and iron and stone.’

Choir**Brahms - How lovely are thy dwellings**

The parish Churches of England are even more varied than the landscape. The tall town church, smelling of furniture polish and hot-water pipes, a shadow of the medieval marvel it once was, so assiduously have Victorian and even later restorers renewed everything old; the little weather-beaten hamlet church standing in a farmyard down a narrow lane, bat-droppings over the pews and one service a month; the church of a once prosperous village, a relic of the 15th-century wool trade, whose soaring splendour of stone and glass subsequent generations have had neither the energy nor the money to destroy; the suburban church with Northamptonshire-style steeple rising unexpectedly above slate roofs of London and calling with mid-Victorian bells to the ghosts of merchant carriage folk for whom it was built; the tin chapel-of-ease on the edge of the industrial estate; the High, the Low, the Central churches, the alive and the dead ones, the churches that are easy to pray in and those that are not, the churches whose architecture brings you to your knees, the churches whose decorations affront the sight – all these come within the wide embrace of our Anglican Church, whose arms extend beyond the seas to many fabrics more.

From the first wooden church put up in a forest clearing or stone cell on windy moor to the newest social hall, with sanctuary and altar partitioned off, built on the latest industrial estate, our churches have existed chiefly for the celebration of what some call the Mass, or the Eucharist and others call Holy Communion of the Lord’s Supper.

Between the early paganism of Britain and the present paganism there are nearly twenty thousand churches and well over a thousand years of Christianity.

*From the Introduction to Collins Guide to English Parish Churches, ed.
John Betjeman, 1958*

Choir

Boyce - I have surely built thee an house

The men who built our churches and cathedrals are to a large extent unknown figures, ordinary craftsmen who built, to the glory of God, for rich patrons, and for their own personal satisfaction. Here John Ormond celebrates these anonymous heroes in his poem 'Cathedral Builders,' which could almost have been written for this church in which we sit.

They climbed on sketchy ladders towards God,
With winch and pulley hoisted hewn rock into heaven,
Inhabited sky with hammers, defied gravity,
Deified stone, took up God's house to meet Him,

And came down to their suppers and small beer;
Every night slept, lay with their smelly wives,
Quarrelled and cuffed the children, lied,
Spat, sang, were happy or unhappy,

And every day took to the ladders again;
Impeded the rights of way of another summer's
Swallows; grew greyer, shakier, became less inclined
To fix a neighbour's roof of a fine evening,

Saw naves sprout arches, clerestories soar,
Cursed the loud fancy glaziers for their luck,
Somehow escaped the plague, got rheumatism,
Decided it was time to give it up,

To leave the spire to others; and stood in the crowd
Well back from the vestments at the consecration,
Envied the fat bishop his warm boots,
Cocked up a squint eye and said, 'I bloody did that.'

'Cathedral Builders' – John Ormond

Choir

Sumsion – Jubilate (composed for St Bride's)

The churches that medieval craftsmen built were built to be worshipped in, to be places where the veil between heaven and earth becomes very thin, and God can be glimpsed in all His wonder and mystery. John Betjeman again evokes that sense of worship as he recalls a Sunday morning visit to King's College Cambridge.

File into yellow candle light, fair choristers of King's
 Lost in the shadowy silence of canopied Renaissance stalls
 In blazing glass above the dark glow skies and thrones and wings
 Blue, ruby, gold and green between the whiteness of the walls
 And with what rich precision the stonework soars and springs
 To fountain out a spreading vault—a shower that never falls.

In far East Anglian churches, the clasped hands lying long
 Recumbent on sepulchral slabs or effigied in brass
 Buttress with prayer this vaulted roof so white and light and strong
 And countless congregations as the generation pass
 Join choir and great crowned organ case, in centuries of song
 To praise Eternity contained in Time and coloured glass.

John Betjeman

Choir

Purcell – I was glad

In an increasingly secular age many people find churches to be ambiguous places; hard to identify with and yet also the repository of so much that is important, that roots us and speaks of eternal truths. Philip Larkin in his poem *Church going well* expresses this ambiguity, and muses on the future purpose of these significant places. Here are the final three stanzas of his poem :-

A shape less recognisable each week,
 A purpose more obscure. I wonder who
 Will be the last, the very last, to seek
 This place for what it was; one of the crew
 That tap and jot and know what rood-lofts were?
 Some ruin-bibber, randy for antique,
 Or Christmas-addict, counting on a whiff
 Of gown-and-bands and organ-pipes and myrrh?
 Or will he be my representative,

Bored, uninformed, knowing the ghostly silt
 Dispersed, yet tending to this cross of ground
 Through suburb scrub because it held unspilt
 So long and equably what since is found
 Only in separation – marriage, and birth,
 And death, and thoughts of these – for which was built
 This special shell? For, though I've no idea
 What this accoutred frowsty barn is worth,
 It pleases me to stand in silence here;

A serious house on serious earth it is,
 In whose blent air all our compulsions meet,
 Are recognised, and robed as destinies.
 And that much never can be obsolete,
 Since someone will forever be surprising
 A hunger in himself to be more serious,
 And gravitating with it to this ground,
 Which, he once heard, was proper to grow wise in,
 If only that so many dead lie round.

From 'Church Going' – Philip Larkin

Choir

Bairstow – To this temple where we find thee

‘A serious house on serious earth it is, In whose blent air all our compulsions meet, Are recognised, and robed as destinies.’

Churches, in spite of being places of ambiguity and contradiction, are also ladders to God, Eternity contained in Time and coloured glass, places of seeking and finding and being found, of presence and absence, of the God made flesh and of the God who hides himself from us. Let the priest/poet R.S. Thomas have the last word, in his poem ‘In Church’:

Often I try
 To analyse the quality
 Of its silences. Is this where God hides
 From my searching? I have stopped to listen,
 After the few people have gone,
 To the air recomposing itself
 For vigil. It has waited like this
 Since the stones grouped themselves about it.
 These are the hard ribs
 Of a body that our prayers have failed
 To animate. Shadows advance
 From their corners to take possession
 Of places the light held
 For an hour. The bats resume
 Their business. The uneasiness of the pews
 Ceases. There is no other sound
 In the darkness but the sound of a man
 Breathing, testing his faith
 On emptiness, nailing his questions
 One by one to an untenanted cross.

Choir

Bruckner – Locus Iste