

Launch of Stonework Appeal Sermon – 30th June 2019

Luke 4:14-21 (Isaiah 58:9b-12; Eph.2:11-end)

Jesus said:

He sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, and to let the oppressed go free.

And then two thousand years later the people I send can go around asking for loads of money to spend on their buildings.

And make no mistake, that is indeed what this morning's sermon is about. I'm straightforwardly asking you to give, and to give really generously, so we can repair the stonework of this building. Overall, the project is going to cost about £102,000. Thanks to generosity, and careful management, we've actually got about £75,000 of that already, but in the next six weeks – by St. Lawrence Day – we're determined to raise the rest. And it starts this morning, asking you, once again to dig deep.

But why? Listen to again to Jesus: he sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim release to captives, recovery of sight to the blind and let the oppressed go free. What has that to do with raising funds for a building? Just think what £25,000 could do for the poor, the hungry, the homeless, the refugee... how can we even begin to think of spending the money like this, when all those people and their needs should be hammering at our hearts? Isn't this just proof-positive that the Church has forgotten all about Jesus of Nazareth, that it has become a kind of historic buildings trust? That's what a lot of Christians, and a lot of people beyond the Church would say.

Well, unsurprisingly, I think they're wrong, and that this appeal is something we should be doing, precisely as good disciples of Jesus. More of why that is in a moment. But mind you, even if they're overall wrong, those people are right to remind us about the order of priorities. Actually, we do care more about people than buildings. Actually, most of your money, your time, your care and attention *should* go to the poor and the hungry. That is indeed what Jesus will judge you on in the end, and not how much you gave to the Building Fund. I imagine most of you understand that, and act on it, in your own personal giving to a whole range of organisations. And as a Church we try to live that too, in our charitable giving every year, in what we do with Malawi, in giving away all the proceeds of the fete. People matter more than buildings.

That said... sometimes, buildings also matter. And they matter because people matter: because this building being here, being *open*, does something for people, gives something to people, that our giving them more money never could. You shall not live by bread alone, says the Bible. Bread matters, of course it does: but we were made for more than bread. We

have deeper and greater needs, and they're what this building is here for. People come here ... not just on Sunday, but often, alone and quietly throughout the week They come here, looking for.... for what? For all sorts of things: for peace, for quiet, for rest, for courage, for strength, for a sense of connection with those they have lost. Every sort of person comes: the harassed parent, the child, the drunk, the autistic, the successful, the guilty, all of them come, perhaps unable to say precisely *why* they come but drawn here nonetheless, knowing that this is the place. A place, thankfully, where no one *makes* you say why you have come, where it is OK to simply sit and be, where you don't have to justify yourself, and no-one is going to hurry you, where you can just sit and unfold and be.

Now, many of those people might never be seen here on a Sunday morning. They don't do services, they don't do church. Nonetheless, make no mistake, they're coming into the presence of God. They may not use the language – though many do – but my goodness, if you're sitting here and finding love, joy, peace, courage and forgiveness, if you're finding a Presence which makes sense of and begins to heal you – that's God. And that is Item 1 on our reason for our existence as a church, to help people find Him and know Him. Because that relationship, after all, is the biggest and fullest truth of what it means for the poor to hear good news, for the blind to receive sight and the captive go free. Meet God, says the Gospel, *know God* and you learn the length, breadth, height and depth of these words.

Now you could do it, of course, without a building. There's the park, there's the woods, there's the privacy of your own home. Of course you can meet God there. God isn't trapped in a building. Jesus himself went out to pray alone in the wilderness. All true. But... there is something about church buildings, especially ones like this which have stood for hundreds and hundreds of years. Think of it: through the Black Death, through Wars of Roses and Reformations, through the execution of King Charles and the long reign of Victoria, through Industrial Revolution and two world wars, in all that swirls around us now Through it all, through all the chaos national and local, this building has stood - stood steady, reliable, permanent. Not unchanging, of course, every generation made its adjustments. But recognisably the same, recognisably faithful. Just like the One it represents: Jesus Christ, as the Bible says, the same yesterday, today and forever. Faithful, and able, and *here* to deal with whatever comes next. Whatever the national crisis, whatever the private storm, we are not abandoned to our own resources. Come here, to God's open, public, place. Whatever it is can find its place here, find its place in the great story of God, Jesus of Nazareth and the world. Come, says the building, the story is here for you.

Eight hundred and sixty five years this building has made that promise to this community. For eight hundred and sixty five years this place has been loved and guarded and handed on to the next generation, as one of the greatest gifts. People have poured their love and their treasure into this place, to help others find God, to help others live. To help *us* find God, to help *us* live. *We cannot be the generation that lets it fall.*

And it will fall, in due course, if we do not give now. If we do not fix the stonework now, we leave the next generation a choice – pay an even bigger bill, or the windows fall out. After the windows fall out, the rot sets in and the walls become unsound. Eventually, they become unsafe. Eventually, unless someone pays the bill, they collapse. And that would be on us, the people who spotted what was happening and turned away.

We will not do that. We will not be the generation that lets it fall. PCC has already placed the order, we have acted in faith, the work is about to begin. Now there is merely the little matter of paying for it. So I finish, quite simply, by asking each of you to look around, and think what this building means to you. Think of what it means to the people of this parish, and what it will mean in years and centuries to come. And then, please, go home and make that transfer, write that cheque – give what you can, whether it be £10 or £1000 pounds. And we will pass this church on a new generation, and tell them we were not found wanting; we did not let you down. And they, like us, will keep coming here, and keep finding God, and giving glory to Father, Son and Holy Spirit.

Peter Waddell