

TRINITY 8

Sometimes, just one sentence from Scripture jumps out at you! In our Epistle Reading from Hebrews today, it is for me, the description of Abraham whose home would not always be a wandering, tented existence as we hear in verse 10...

“For he looked forward to the city that has foundations, whose architect and builder is God.”

I remember reading a biography called ‘God’s Architect’ concerning the great Victorian advocate of Gothic Revival style, Augustus Pugin, who perhaps most famously designed the interior of the Palace of Westminster where he collaborated with Charles Barry. I mention him because by the time he was just 30 years old, he had built 22 churches, 3 cathedrals, 3 convents, half a dozen houses, several schools and a Cistercian monastery!

Another architect whose work I know more intimately was also a giant associated with the ‘Oxford Movement’, William Butterfield. My church in one of the poorest parts of Manchester was a poorer version of the more elaborate, famous and expensive All Saints’, Margaret Street. Keble College, Oxford was very much his creation also – every part of it in fact, including every fixture and fitting, every brick, mosaic and tile. He was impossible to work with and demanded silence from anyone working on site. In the controversy surrounding his involvement with restoration work inside Winchester College chapel, he was criticized for stripping out the ancient panelling and seating arrangements leaving the walls bare and desolate and the pupils sitting

uncomfortably on “squat” benches. I guess there was no ‘DAC’ to contend with or, in his day, a ‘Victorian Society’ to contend with. He had the freedom to design and build as he pleased – and yet, despite that austere and disciplined code he lived by, he was (like the Pugin family), absolutely committed to our Christian faith and worship and most of all, his ‘calling’ to show us and let in glimpses of that heavenly firmament and city, alluded to in Hebrews.

The epistle is not wary of poetic and artistic license in describing the adventures and pilgrimage of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob; they desire a better country and homeland. “God is not ashamed to be called their God; indeed he has prepared a city for them.”

We should take heart from this line of scripture which jumps out at us because whether it is architecture, liturgy, or nuclear physics, it is God’s vision and promise of heaven which matters most. One day, at our end, we will see the beginning of the eternal beauty of God, face to face.

I wish our funerals and memorial services captured more of that universal hope, instead of focussing so much on personal achievements and ‘over-egged’ eulogies! Sometimes, I confess, my head goes down and my heart sinks when the light of the Gospel is squeezed out of any such scripts and public conversation. It is almost as if the original Easter story had never been heard, or received, even when we sit in beautiful churches or cathedrals lovingly and meticulously designed in the widest of spaces for both Word and Sacrament.

Surely we are all waiting for the final event or ‘eschaton’ in the divine plan – which is not punishment and retribution, which is not the home of eternal flames or hell. No, what Abraham sought, we seek also. In St Luke’s words, we seek an ‘unfailing treasure in heaven’ where more of God’s grace and redeeming purposes can be known and enjoyed. We should be expecting God’s promise of glory and radiance as we would expect to feel refreshment and excitement jumping into a pool or fountain on a hot summer’s day! Philip Larkin’s poem, ‘Water’, seems a fitting, if unorthodox, close:

“If I were called in
To construct a religion
I should make use of water.

Going to church
Would entail a fording
To dry, different clothes;

My liturgy would employ
Images of sousing,
A furious devout drench,

And I should raise in the east
A glass of water
Where any-angled light
Would congregate endlessly.”

AMEN.