

BHHCT 20th. ANNIVERSARY SERVICE, ST. ALBAN'S CATHEDRAL, 26.11.11

SERMON BY THE Rt. Rev. JOHN TAYLOR

Readings: Haggai 1.1 – 2.5, Matthew 7.24 – end

I am told that twenty years ago I preached at a memorable occasion in Hatfield parish church to launch the Bedfordshire and Hertfordshire Historic Churches Trust. It sounded like a good idea at the time, but little did we know what it would become. The only thing I can recall about it was that the founders were admirably keen, and the objects of the Trust were laudable. I had no hesitation in giving it my blessing.

I chose as the reading on that occasion the passage from Haggai which has been read again this afternoon, and in a rash moment I considered repeating today the sermon I preached then in the sure knowledge that no-one would recognise its reappearance. However I can neither remember what I said nor do I have any recollection of having filed my sermon notes even if I could remember where they were. But as I re-read the passage I can well imagine what my theme and my text would have been.

It would have been Haggai 2 verse 4: **‘Be strong, all you people of the land, and work; for I am with you ‘, declares the Lord Almighty.** And that is precisely what you have done these past twenty years. The Trust has worked prodigiously hard, you have animated a whole army of bikers and hikers, you have raised millions of pounds, you have given your grants judiciously and generously and you have given hope to churches faced with overwhelming odds, and your strength remains undiminished. Yes, you have answered the call and truly the Lord has been with you. And there is no sign of your wanting to give up.

But you still face pockets of scepticism from those who regard our ancient church buildings as millstones to be abandoned rather than as cornerstones to be built upon. It is all too easy, when faced with crippling bills, to hanker after a church-free existence, to envy our community church neighbours who hire a school or warehouse and have thousands of pounds to spare to spend on supporting mission and providing for the poor and needy. Well, that is their calling and we thank God for what they can do. But hiring is for the short term and we are in it for the long-term. We are the temporary occupiers of historic buildings we do not own, often works of architectural magnificence as well as of local pride, and we are called to be stewards both of them and the Gospel to which they have born witness for centuries.

Buildings speak with the voice of generations, saying ‘Here prayer has been wont to be prayed, here God’s praises have been sung by many and by few, here God’s word has been preached and taught and honoured; and we are determined that this will never die out in this place as long as we live.’ We believe in a God who is and who was and who will always be. And though we know from Scripture that our God does not live in temples made with hands; and that buildings, like kingdoms, can rise and fall and rise again, the church buildings that we worship in are God’s pulpit from which in every generation He preaches his message of sins forgiven, of hope for the hopeless, of comfort in times of tension and despair, of victory over death and of eternal life through Jesus Christ. Let fresh expressions abound, let honorary chaplains permeate very sector of our society, but in every parish the church building cannot avoid being the headquarters from which the good news of Jesus goes out.

The other distraction which can impede the work you do is the oft-repeated argument that there are better things on which to spend one's money than bricks and mortar, or gutters and downpipes. Of course there are. No church should live unto itself. Every church has a mandate to go out beyond its own confines and serve the parish in whatever way it can. And I am impressed when a church, immersed in the toils of fund-raising, makes the bold decision to set aside a percentage of all that it receives to go to mission activity, or, when completing a building project, vows that the next call on its energies and resources will be a not-for-ourselves endeavour beyond the confines of the church.

Yes, I know that this is a tall order. The church's work is a never-ending task. It always has been. That is why the apostle urged on his readers with the words: 'Be not weary in well-doing', to which he added the encouraging assurance 'for at the proper time we shall reap a harvest if we do not give up'.

So I say to you, in the words of the prophet, 'Be strong, you people of the land, and go on working, for the Lord your God is with you'.