

preached by the Revd Canon Malcolm E. Grant
in Dunstable Priory on Saturday, 23 July, 2011
before members of the Beds and Herts Historic Churches Trust

A SACRED TRUST

*“When I consider how my light is spent
Ere half my days, in this dark world and wide,
And that one talent which is death to hide
Lodged with me useless, though my soul more bent
To serve therewith my Maker, and present
My true account, lest He returning chide, –
Doth God exact day-labour, light denied?
I fondly ask:- “*

Many of you, like me, will have had to learn Milton's sonnet, "On his blindness" at school, and probably recited it in your heads with me just now. As poet, historian, teacher, religious pamphleteer and civil servant, the loss of his sight in his mid-40's was a major blow, and in this meditation, he returns to Jesus's parable which was our Second lesson this evening, fearing lest he prove to be the unprofitable servant who received the trust of a single talent from his master, and instead of trading with it to earn a profit, simply wrapped it up in a cloth and buried it. The deeply devout Milton, a staunch Puritan who perhaps took life too seriously, feared lest he should face a similar condemnation for his enforced idleness.

It is easy for someone in such a plight to fall into resentment and self-pity. "Why me?" "What have I done to deserve this?" Faced with a real challenge, we are all tempted to go down that road – which quickly paralyzes action. We fall into the very inertia which Milton dreaded.

And what, you may be asking yourselves, has this to do with our work as the Beds & Herts Historic Churches Trust? I suggest that the heritage of ancient church buildings is a talent which has been entrusted to the church of the 21st century. Yes, there are many other opportunities and problems which are ours – so much so that it is very easy to blame the responsibility for the care of our buildings as the main reason why we do so little to face those other challenges. "If only we weren't always having to repair the church", congregations and P.C.C.s say – implying that otherwise we should be fully engaged in some imaginative programme of evangelism or social outreach into the local community. "All our money goes on the building – and, of course, the Parish Share", we complain, knowing full well that active fund-raising tends to stop as soon as that target has been reached. But it's not really like that – is it? Our problem is very often lack of motivation and a famine of effort, once the immediate demands which clamour for our attention week by week have been met. The leaking roof, the crumbling masonry remind us every time we go to church of the need to do something about them – the other calls can conveniently be put off till a more auspicious time!

History has left us with this great heritage of ancient buildings, and there's no point in wishing it hadn't! The temptation to waste time and effort wishing our situation were somehow different is nothing new. "If I were wanting to go to Tipperary, I wouldn't be starting from here", is not an option. Instead of wishing we were somewhere else, we must accept the reality of our situation, and get on with it. And I'm talking from hard experience. In forty-odd years of ordained ministry, I have built two churches, extended another, done a full-scale restoration of one of our smaller cathedrals, and undertaken the repair and renovation of several other churches. Buildings have been a significant part of my ministry, and I have tried to integrate those demands into the mission and ministry of the particular parishes and congregations, rather than resenting them as a drain on our energies and resources. Restoring churches and reshaping them for mission are projects that go hand in hand.

This year we are celebrating twenty years of the work of this Trust. Over exactly that period I have served as a Trustee of the Scottish Churches Architectural Heritage Trust and a member of its Grants Committee. So I have experience of our common task from both ends. As well as the struggle of trying to raise huge sums of money for historic buildings, I know the value of even a small grant from a charity like yours. It is more than the actual money: it brings an assurance that others are sharing the grind, that others are interested, that what our parish is doing is part of a wider endeavour and is supported and encouraged by a wider fellowship. There will be folk here this afternoon who have experienced that boost, just when spirits are flagging, and are grateful to the Beds & Herts Historic Churches Trust for its timely generosity.

Our buildings are a talent which the Master has entrusted to us to use in His service. Often the church is the most prominent building in the community, erected as a beacon of light and hope in a struggling world – and we need to think how they can fulfil that role in the very different age in which they now stand. Stones and mortar are a sacrament of the faith and aspirations of previous generations, as well as a sacrament of the presence of God in the midst of His people and their everyday lives. How can we enable our buildings to testify to such things in the hurly-burly of contemporary living? Their walls are soaked with our forebears' prayers, and many of us draw energy and inspiration from this; how can we put other people in touch with this source of spiritual strength? These are the questions with which we all must wrestle today. In the Middle Ages, the paintings and windows were the people's text-book of faith: they learned their faith from the images all around them – that's why the paintings and the windows in churches were often called "the poor man's Bible". Can we in this generation find ways to use our architectural heritage to help us communicate the faith we are called to proclaim?

To look for answers to such questions is part of God's agenda for today's church. It needs vision and imagination. We shall need to listen attentively to the folk around us to identify their real concerns; we shall need to listen closely to people who can recognize the underlying Christian significance of the events of contemporary living, modern prophets who are able to see the hand of God behind events that are reported in our newspapers and on our television screens, and we shall need people who can communicate those insights in new ways to folk around us. People today are bombarded with words from every side, and most of them have stopped listening. But since the Reformation, the Church has relied almost exclusively on words to put its message across. Our buildings may well offer us new ways to communicate, through welcome and interpretation, through imaginative activities and genuine care – and it is to be hoped that there will be grants to encourage and make possible some of these innovations as well. In olden days the Church was one of the most important patrons of the arts, because it saw the power of art to convey the message and the spirit of the Gospel. Can we rediscover this, instead of relying on functional artefacts selected from a catalogue? One of the most exciting things I was ever involved in was the commissioning of a sequence of mural paintings in St Mary's Cathedral, Glasgow, which tried to interpret the Gospel in contemporary images which were not too transient. And it didn't break the bank to achieve it! We were lucky to have a talented Christian artist in our congregation, and to get real support from the Scottish Arts Council, both money and wise advice.

That brings me to one of my greatest concerns today. So often when a church tries to put this vision into practice, it ends up being frustrated at every turn. Look at almost any of our ancient churches, and you can trace a line of development and change as succeeding generations sought to use the building to convey the meaning of the Gospel to new generations, and to express their worship in new ways. The principles of conservation must be integrated with but subservient to the church's on-going mission which is the vital task for which God called it into being. Where this does not happen, we are simply spending money to preserve a museum-exhibit. I am sure that this is not a criticism to be levelled at the Beds and Herts Historic Churches Trust, for it understands the need to adapt to a new challenge in a rapidly-changing society. I hope it is not a criticism which we can level at Diocesan Advisory Committees, although I can't help feeling sometimes that fine-art and faithfulness to ancient methods of building command more attention than mission in the 21st century. I know it is a justifiable criticism of some of the decisions of bodies like English Heritage, who seem not to understand why we want to make changes to our inherited buildings to make them better servants in our task of bringing the love and the truth of Jesus Christ to our own communities. The conservation

of a church building cannot be divorced from the purpose for which that church was built and for which previous generations have contributed gladly to its repair and embellishment.

We need to recapture a stereoscopic vision of the future of our church buildings. Yes, they are a wonderful heritage of the past, of our Christian past, of the story of our own local community, of people's hopes and fears, and their preservation is a sacred trust – but they are also a heritage of a dynamic faith based on the command to “go and make disciples of all the nations”, and obedience to that commission must underlie every decision that is made about their use, their repair and their development, a trust from God to be used in carrying forward His work in the heart of our own communities, not to be wrapped up carefully and buried for safety in the sterile ground of obscurantism. Thank God for that witness to His glory and His all-embracing love in the heart of your community, and pray that everyone involved with it may make common cause in working together to let it speak anew the message of salvation to the people of today and tomorrow.

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