

What is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place?

Imagine if church buildings could speak, and answer that challenge for themselves. The other day I came across a letter purporting to be written by a church: it appeared in the *Northampton Mercury* in 1866. The church in question was St Katharine's in that town, built on the cheap in 1839 as a chapel of ease to the ancient parish church of All Saints. It used local stone, it had iron pillars, it seated 1,200 and according to documents of the time *made no pretensions to architectural beauty*. The letter is a droll, but rather sad and pointed, piece. Hear a bit of what that church had to say for itself 150 years ago:

Sir, —My feelings have been very much hurt by some remarks of my present minister in his annual report, for, although I am considered by many to have iron nerves and a stony heart I am very sensitive in some respects, especially in regard to honour and truth. Besides, I am a great person, and of more than ordinary capacity, and therefore I think I am entitled to address the public sometimes.

Now, Sir, I protest against being called 'one of the dirtiest churches in the town'. The comparison is an invidious one, and calculated to excite bad feeling and jealousy among the sacred edifices themselves, to say nothing of my mother who lives so near to me [*remember this was a daughter church of All Saints*] ... I stand on my dignity, and shall proceed to justify my own character with grave propriety. I am only a district church, built to supply the wants of the poor part of All Saints' parish, and although much ignorance, bad taste, and some roguery were betrayed when I was built, I was considered, when finished, to be of tolerable capacity and substance, and was finished with good oak painting and stone coloured walls, which were always kept clean, as my sexton and churchwardens can testify. Therefore I protest against being called one of the dirtiest churches in the town. It reflects, moreover, upon my congregation, for if I was the dirtiest church the town, then they were the dirtiest congregation in the town, which they were not; but they can speak for themselves. If, however, those who built me were ignorant and without taste, my subsequent guardians were men of common sense, and never attempted to make me what I really was not. If I were not a sacred edifice, I might be tempted to use a vulgar expression, and say they never tried to 'make a silk purse of a sow's ear', but, as I stand upon my dignity, I shall not use it.

Now, in the recent attempts which have been made to dress me out in this meretricious garb, had not my minister abused me, I might have submitted in silence, notwithstanding the way in which I have been knocked and torn about — I say might have submitted with silence, though with considerable shame. Yes, shame, for I formerly consoled myself with the thought that my defects, though so great and many, were not obtrusive and impudent; but now my deformities are brought into painful notoriety by being gilded and painted in the most gaudy colours. Take, for instance, the two things in the arch over my chancel called angels. They had such villainous faces that I used to be ashamed of anybody seeing them, and my feelings were often spared, but now they are gilt all over, and everybody looks at them, some with a frown, some a kind of laugh, which I should hardly know how to interpret, only I heard one person say, as he turned away, 'they are brazen villains now!'

And so it goes on. Most of the rest of the letter is about pew rents, which was the real grievance. This was a subject which pre-occupied many Church of England parishes in the mid-19th century, but we needn't go there now. By the time this church was opened in 1881 many churches were able to say proudly *all seats in this church are free and unappropriated*. But I wonder what the church of St James the Great Daisy Hill might say if it wrote a letter to the local paper today – what would its feelings be? It would have a very different story to tell from that of the poor church in Northampton (long-since demolished, leaving only the churchyard). Though St James now finds itself on the Heritage at Risk Register, and currently without a minister who might be rude about it, I think it knows that today it is loved and cherished and cared for (even if there have been times in the past where it has been seen as a problem and an embarrassment rather than an opportunity). It is appreciated for what it is rather than what it is not, it hasn't been knocked about, and in this heritage weekend and throughout the year you want to open the doors and let it tell its story as part of the work of the people of God, as we say and sing *All are welcome in this place*. Your parish publicity, and the events of this weekend (including yesterday's wonderful bass trombone recital by Chris Guénault – you missed a treat if you weren't here) all show that you're doing the right things, and you know the key elements of this church's story.

You know about the two sisters who wanted the bell tower (currently such a problem) to be visible from their home (I wonder if they could also hear the bell). You know how they spent the family fortune to provide a church, but being canny Lancashire women, they had it made mainly of economical stock brick and terra cotta rather than of more costly stone: as the current Pevsner says, it was *a masterly performance for very little cash, £6,500*. Indeed so: unlike poor St Katharine's, no

ignorance, bad taste or roguery in its design, but a class act, with high-class windows and fittings and fixtures, well-deserving its listed status, and national funding. Who'd have thought Daisy Hill would be on the tourist trail in 2018?

Some of you even know all about its architects, and can explain how it's important to say that this is a church by Paley and Austin – and not by one of the various other confusing manifestations of that Lancaster firm, such as Paley, Austin and Paley; or Austin and Paley; or Austin, Paley and Austin – let alone its earlier versions involving Edmund Sharpe, whom some of us (myself and the Guénaults) know from his terra cotta church in Lancaster, which is also cheap but leaky. The experts will say that it was Hubert Austin who upped the practice's game (I hope there's no-one here from Bolton parish church, which Edward Paley did before his relative Hubert joined the firm). But whether or not you know any of this detail, you know that this church is your heritage – as well as part of Heritage England – and a heritage that you can be rightly proud of as you share it with others.

But (says the Lord) this is the one to whom I will look – to the humble and contrite in spirit, who tremble at my word.

So I trust you understand that this *sacred edifice, standing on its dignity* (as the church in Northampton described itself), has to be inhabited by those who abound in the word and works of the Lord, who together continue a living ministry of mission and service to the community. In other words, we must not only inhabit our buildings (and make good and flexible use of them); we must inhabit the gospel.

When St Paul speaks of a skilled master builder, he wasn't thinking of the forebears of Paley and Austin: he used the term to describe himself, as the one who was laying a gospel foundation; and warned that if Jesus Christ is not the cornerstone, the whole structure will collapse. And if our custodianship of that gospel structure is slapdash or unworthy or thoughtless or riven with controversy it will not survive. So how shall we go forward? *Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace; here the love of Christ shall end divisions; all are welcome in this place.*

Today's gospel – a parable about a great banquet – is open to misinterpretation if we see it as a command to compel people to come into the church despite their feeble or not so feeble excuses, rather than going out to them and meeting them at their point of need: that would not be a proper mission strategy. Remember that Jesus told the parable to affirm the words of the dinner guest, *Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!* It is all about God's gracious, but urgent, and inclusive, invitation; God's longing for a ready response, to the *banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet, to the feast that frees us: all are welcome in this place.* If this church does not enshrine the gospel sacraments of baptism and eucharist, and the honest preaching of God's word, it is all to no avail.

So what does it really mean to say *all are welcome*, as we seek to refresh old links with the community and build new ones, and let our building do its work, and become a living heritage? The language we use today would not be familiar to the Victorians 150 years ago, though they were struggling with the same challenges that we face. We speak now of inclusion, of equal access, of diversity, of honouring people's stories even where they may not fit neatly into the traditional scheme of things. The last verse of the hymn sums it up:

*Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,
let this house proclaim from floor to rafter:
All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.*

Isaiah 66.1-2

Thus says the Lord:

Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool;

what is the house that you would build for me, and what is my resting-place?

All these things my hand has made, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord.

But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit,
who trembles at my word.

NT: 1 Corinthians 3.10-17

According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ. Now if anyone builds on the foundation with gold, silver, precious stones, wood, hay, straw—the work of each builder will become visible, for the Day will disclose it, because it will be revealed with fire, and the fire will test what sort of work each has done. If what has been built on the foundation survives, the builder will receive a reward. If the work is burned, the builder will suffer loss; the builder will be saved, but only as through fire.

Do you not know that you are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in you? If anyone destroys God's temple, God will destroy that person. For God's temple is holy, and you are that temple.

Gospel: Luke 14.15-24

One of the dinner guests, on hearing this, said to Jesus, 'Blessed is anyone who will eat bread in the kingdom of God!' Then Jesus said to him, 'Someone gave a great dinner and invited many. At the time for the dinner he sent his slave to say to those who had been invited, "Come; for everything is ready now." But they all alike began to make excuses. The first said to him, "I have bought a piece of land, and I must go out and see it; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have bought five yoke of oxen, and I am going to try them out; please accept my apologies." Another said, "I have just been married, and therefore I cannot come." So the slave returned and reported this to his master. Then the owner of the house became angry and said to his slave, "Go out at once into the streets and lanes of the town and bring in the poor, the crippled, the blind, and the lame." And the slave said, "Sir, what you ordered has been done, and there is still room." Then the master said to the slave, "Go out into the roads and lanes, and compel people to come in, so that my house may be filled. For I tell you, none of those who were invited will taste my dinner.' '

Let us build a house where love can dwell and all can safely live,
a place where saints and children tell how hearts learn to forgive.
Built of hopes and dreams and visions, rock of faith and vault of grace;
here the love of Christ shall end divisions. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where prophets speak, and words are strong and true,
where all God's children dare to seek to dream God's reign anew.
Here the cross shall stand as witness and as symbol of God's grace;
here as one we claim the faith of Jesus. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where love is found in water, wine and wheat:
a banquet hall on holy ground where peace and justice meet.
Here the love of God, through Jesus, is revealed in time and space;
as we share in Christ the feast that frees us. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where hands will reach beyond the wood and stone
to heal and strengthen, serve and teach, and live the Word they've known.
Here the outcast and the stranger bear the image of God's face;
let us bring an end to fear and danger. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard
and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word.
Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace,

let this house proclaim from floor to rafter. All are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place.