

Evensong – Dedication Festival

Today we have been celebrating the dedication of this building as a church, some 129 years ago. It was built in the early years of this diocese, a little after it had split from Durham, and when the vibrant industrial city was reaching out into this area. It was the brainchild principally of three men.

Charles Mitchell, for whom the church was a public demonstration not only of his prestige, as one of the nation's leading industrialists, but also of his taste and commitment to the wider promotion of the arts in the region.

Somerset Pennefather who was its first vicar, for whom St. Georges represented a turning point in his personal faith journey, and the embodiment of his lively and inclusive interpretation of Christianity.

And Thomas Ralph Spence, for whom it was the commission of a lifetime, his 'one supreme effort', drawing together his talents as architect, artist and craftsman.

When Somerset Pennefather and Charles Mitchell planned this church over a cup of tea, I wonder why they chose this spot? A corner of the extensive grounds of Mitchell's property.. Some distance from the ruins of St Mary's chapel which had been a holy place, a place of pilgrimage for people in medieval times...

Here housing was gradually extending nearer and nearer, covering the fields around. Urban busyness moving northwards. But it was here that Thomas Ralph Spence designed and built what Neil Moat refers to as 'a theatre for the soul'. A place in which God might be present and presented through the beauty of a building, an opportunity for mission

The building is very beautiful, particularly when you walk inside.. It is a place that points us to God, in the quality and proportions of its interior and the colour and shapes of its decoration. The Green provides a setting around it of peace, tranquillity and relaxation.

But this building is only part of the story.. In coming together here as a Christian community we focus our prayers in the stillness and beauty of this place. But we need to do more.

In our first reading, we heard from the prophet Jeremiah the warning to the people of Israel that you cannot truly have a holy place unless you have holy people. It is no good to say we

have this beautiful church if in the next breath we fail to address injustice and pain. We need to live according to God's law of love for our neighbours, and to find ways in our daily lives to heal brokenness, and respond to the challenges of our day. We need to reach out to the people of this community and of this city who are in need, and to contribute to the needs of our world. We need to look carefully at our contributions to addressing climate change, building a Dementia Friendly Jesmond, befriending young parents, welcoming lonely students, comforting those in pain. In all that we do, are we holy people?

In our second reading Paul is writing to the Christian community in Corinth, a busy multi-ethnic port city, largely pagan and full of temptations for new disciples. He reminds them that they are the building that matters: God's temple – and that God's Spirit lives in them. He – Paul - laid the foundations of their faith, and now it is up to them what sort of materials they use to strengthen it... Charles Mitchell would recognise the image – will they build with marble and lapis lazuli, strong and beautiful, or with straw and mud – easily blown away as in the children's story? To build God's kingdom here on earth we need to study and pray, and be a community who seek to help each other to build for the future - and we must not be afraid to push and test the strength of what is built, just as, Paul reminds the Corinthians, God will do...

In medieval times the faithful would travel long distances to St Mary's chapel just above the dene to worship. The village of Jesmond grew up to serve the needs of the people who came. In 1888, as the city expanded and roads replaced tracks and paths, this new building stood high above the changing landscape, easily noticeable from the hills of Gateshead and from most places around, a visible sign of confidence in the new and rapidly expanding Diocese. Now, to many of those who pass by on the street, on foot, in buses or cars, or perhaps catch a glimpse of its campanile from the Town Moor or the bars and restaurants of Osborne Road this may just seem a large grey building, striking, but half hidden in the trees, with, on sunny days, a pleasant space for picnics in front.. Society today is increasingly unfamiliar with any faith, and with places for prayer..

But the church is not just stone and mortar. It is people.. us.. We need to build up our confidence and faith, and reach out to the people around us.. . We need to live holy lives, and to respond to the needs of the people who surround us, working to build a church for future generations, and God's Kingdom here on earth.