

Hosea 11. 1-9

Colossians 3. 1-4

Luke 12. 13-31

In another life, or with different circumstances in my life, I might have been an architect. I love building and good design, and, have had, since a young age a deep fascination with historic buildings; of them as signs of, not just the past, but as sites of continuity with the past. I love good design and building because there's no excuse for poor design and low quality buildings because as Winston Churchill said: *we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us*. How we shape our future is reflected in how we shape our buildings in the present – the care or carelessness placed in their design, their construction and their care.

Churchill made his remark - *we shape our buildings; thereafter they shape us* - in the British House of Commons at its reopening in late 1943. The Nazis had bombed the British Parliament building in 1941 and there was debate about whether it should be rebuilt, reinstated as it was. But they did rebuild it because they saw it as an essential symbol of British identity, a symbol of hard-won democracy. The building was a symbol of a national commitment to a particular way of being together as a nation. All of this, of course, in opposition to the threat of Nazi fascism. Yes, the parliament building was not just a place where MPs met and debated and deliberated and made laws but it was also a sign of a continuity, of often tumultuous human struggle, of collective commitment to a certain kind of future – to rebuild was also the rejecting a certain kind of future.

When the mob invaded the United States Capitol building in Washington of January 6th 2021, it suddenly became clear that certain national commitments and certainties, which most thought were sacred, were all of a sudden under threat. If the mob violence had taken place somewhere else, then the significance of the event might have seemed less of a threat. But the event taking place in that particular building meant that it carried with it deep symbolic meaning for American identity; still now, four years later under threat.

So, what of church buildings? In this country were we so readily pull buildings down almost as soon as we have put them up. What of this building which cost £5000 to build - \$10,000 when converted to dollars, but which is now insured for \$22 million. This building is a symbol of our forebears' commitment to certain things to do with the Gospel. We reformed Christians don't consecrate our places of worship – unlike Roman Catholics and Anglicans. We don't consider that we have a sacralised relationship with our buildings. But I'm not sure this is true, because when humans consecrate a building we set it aside for a particular purpose. There was great collective commitment to the construction of this place of worship. This is a place in which we are invited to give ourselves over to the transcendent – we give ourselves over to experience something more than mundane human experience. To build such a space is to create a space in which we give ourselves over; collectively we give ourselves up to something much greater than ourselves: our egos, our tightly held opinions, our brokenness, all are submitted to an understanding of the God who is our beginning and our end.

But this setting aside of a sacred space is a tricky one for us Christians. A few weeks ago we heard Jesus say to the disciples: *foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the son of man has nowhere to lay his head.* And today we hear him warn against the accumulation of wealth as bulwark against the uncertainties of the future: *You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?* We are called to be rich towards the kingdom, yet, at the same time we know that to be human is to locate ourselves, to put down roots and build and settle.

But as pilgrims, always on the way to the promised end, this space is not our space; it is a space of which we are but custodians. And our custodianship must be expressed in a way which reflects our collective attention to the eternal which takes place in this space. We mustn't be so reduced to the economic and practical that when it has outlived its usefulness for us, or we no longer feel we can manage or maintain it, that we can close it, discard it, make it more multi-purpose. If we consider this just any other space then we might find we have abandoned our core task of laying ourselves open to the transcendent and have reduced God simply to something useful in our lives.

We live in a time when everything is reduced to its utility, its usefulness. And unfortunately, with the neo-liberal mindset which has so invaded and occupied our souls, we have reduced the measure of everything to monetary value. How much will it cost. We can't afford that! How can we get it cheaper? It's the Australian way of life; how little can I get it for? We know the cost of everything, but the value of nothing. It's a mindset which is utterly corrosive to the life of the spirit.

As I have been in ministry over twenty years or so I have become aware of a greater and greater tendency to dismiss the singleness of purpose for which churches have been set aside; consecrated as buildings to be then consecrated by people by their use for a very particular purpose. This erosion of a the very particular purpose of a church becomes symbolic of an erosion of soul. Churches are signs of certain commitments, of a certain vision for who we are and who God might be for us – along with particular commitments to a shared way of being.

By our gathering here each week we continue to consecrate this building: by our presence, by our prayer and our song. We consecrate it by reading and reflecting on the Word here; this divine word. It's not any word that we come here to listen to. We place our lives under it; we set our priorities by it; we order our collective life by it; we affirm that it speaks to us of a kingdom that it not of this world and yet shapes the way we are in the world. We consecrate ourselves to living by the grace and mercy which come to us in the stories of the saints and sinners found in scripture's pages. This is not just any space.

So, what is this big pile of bricks and stone and timber to us that cost tens of thousands to insure and maintain each year? Who are we, who do we become on each occasion as we gather, who do we become as we gather over time together in this place? We shape the building; the building shapes us. Forty years ago or so, the leaders of the congregation took the courageous step to reorient the church; turn it from facing the organ and for the visual focus of worship to be taken way from tiers of choir stalls and a dominant pulpit, ten feet above contradiction, to something which resonated more with what was taking place in churches around the world; a kind of democratising of worship. The Roman Catholic church made big architectural shifts in churches

worldwide following Vatican II in the early 1960s. From the priest celebrating the mass with his back to the congregation, acting as a kind of intermediary between the people and God, to celebrating mass at the table facing the people, celebrating together. Since the 60s, for Methodists and Presbyterians, the preacher came down to earth, and amongst the people, with the people.

In the recently formed Faith Development group on Thursday we discussed how we understand ourselves in worship. Is it that you see me, or any other ordained person who is leading, as performing up front. Are the elders Santa's little helpers; simply a range of people so that we have a variety of voices? Or do you feel able to enter in; that we are all participating in the liturgy – a word which means “the work of the people.” Are our words simply words on the page, or something that you read with your inner-eye? Do you experience our prayer as an individual and a collective wondering? Because this is what we are here to do – a collective wondering about the presence of God in the world; the pain of the world; all our worship is a prayerful leaning toward the kingdom coming into our presence. A collective attention to the divine in our midst.

When I wonder about our places of worship my question always is: does this place enable this collective attention and wondering? Does it invoke or provoke, a sense of the transcendent in us? Do we feel consecrated, or desecrated? And how is beauty attended to here? Is it a space which is cared for, that you get a sense of devoted attention of the space when you enter it? The question is not whether something pleases us, or entertains, or bores us, but whether we feel a sense of spirit; that there is something more that takes place in it. Because it is for such purpose that this building continues to be set aside.

There is a story about an old man planting fruit trees. A young person comes past and asks why he, an old man, is planting trees that he won't see bear fruit. He responds by saying that he is planting them for his children and grandchildren and others to be born and who will benefit from the nourishment they provide.

Since this church was built the world has changed in ways like never before through human history. So many of the things which were givens in 1925 have been abandoned in the face of the drama and trauma of the intervening years. As we celebrate the legacy of this building today and you orient yourselves toward the future in the next months you will need to refocus on the essence of what this space enables in the human spirit in making people rich towards God and who you are in this task.

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