

EASTER 4
May 15th, 2011

*A sermon preached by Fr. John-Francis Friendship SCP
at S. Andrew's Church, Romford*

INTRODUCTION

Two weeks ago a small group pupils from a local school came to visit St. Andrew's. The purpose of their visit was to explore aspects of the church building and to learn from what they experienced. So I chatted to them about the church, talked about the theology of a building like this and invited them to reflect on the meaning and purpose of what they found here. Afterwards one of the teachers asked what their church was like and one said they met in a large hall. "So what makes it a church?" asked the teacher. After a moments thought the reply came. "The worship group" and we passed on to something else. But it made me think.

Is 'church' just another club we go to, like 'Branigans' but without the drinks? Clearly not! Is 'church' this building? What goes on in it? What do we mean by the very word, 'church', and what were our forebears thinking when they built this place? As I look to the end of my time here I want to explore our faith as Catholic Anglicans: what it's all about, what it has to offer and why it's of value. So today I want to reflect on this church and what it has stood for since it was built almost 150 years ago.

THE CHURCH, THE BODY OF CHRIST

Let's begin by recalling those words from our first reading: *'(The disciples) devoted themselves to the apostles teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers.'* That's a description of a congregation that met, each week, to discover, belong and share in a new life. Those first disciples of Jesus were nearly all Jews so continued to worship in the Temple and synagogue until they were forbidden to and, at the same time, began to admit non-Jews to their community. Those of us who visited Capernaum last November saw the archaeological remains of the House of St. Peter. We could imagine the early Christians meeting there to read the scriptures, break bread and pray. And we saw the way in which that small house had to be extended as the years went by *'as the Lord added to their number those who were being saved'* (2:47)

Our gospel reading concerned the way Jesus drew on the image of a sheepfold to speak of his relationship to his followers – he is the 'good' shepherd who cares about his sheep. We still use this ancient figure of speech when we talk of pastoral care: we speak of bishops as 'shepherds' and give them a crook at their ordination, and some talk of congregations as the 'flock' – 'though there's nothing much sheep-like about most of you!

The way into this 'sheepfold' soon became recognised as through Baptism and it was St. Paul who developed a rich Baptismal theology based on his understanding of our incorporation into Christ. Just before his famous message about love being the greatest of the gifts of the Spirit he talks about being made part of Christ's body through baptism. Do read Chapter 12 of his first Letter to Christians in Corinth where he explores this theme and speaks of the gifts that come through being at one with Christ; of the importance of each member of the body, the way in which the body needs to function and where he affirms *'You are the body of Christ and individually members of it.'* (12:27)

But how on earth can we be Christ's body? Well, here we are encountering a 'mystical' element in our faith. We are moving into the area of Christian spirituality where we need to be open to a deeper understanding that can lead us to new levels of faith. It's one thing to be a sheep feeling quite safe in the fold. Quite another to sense that I am united with the Shepherd. But that's the movement each of us is called to make: not just 'we are the body of Christ', but 'I am part of the Body of Christ'. And churches like this were built to help us make this movement.

DEVELOPMENT OF 'CHURCH'

Those of us who gazed at Peter's House noticed the way it eventually developed into a sacred building – a recognisable 'church'. People have always built sacred places. Any building would do if all we were concerned about were meeting together for teaching and worship. But what people have realised is that buildings themselves express something. There is a sacramental quality about them – they are 'outward and visible signs of inner realities'. In a sense they are projections of our faith not only for the world to see but to touch into our hidden world and open it up.

SACRED SPACE

Since coming here I have introduced a hymn that we sing on our Feast of Dedication – *In our Day of Thanksgiving* – which includes this verse:

*'These stones that have echoed their praises are holy,
And dear is the ground where their feet have once trod;
Yet here they confessed they were strangers and pilgrims,
And still they were seeking the city of God.'* (NEH 208)

There is a holiness associated with places – a sense of the divine that comes through created things – and creation itself. These stones are holy because they have been set apart – dedicated – to God. *'This is the House of God and this is the Gate of Heaven'* we read as we enter this building. Do you check yourselves as you come in and adjust your attention to the fact that you are entering a sacred space? Catholic churches certainly offer signs to help you – holy water to mark you and remind you of your baptism; places to pray before images of the saints. And, most importantly, we have the presence of the Lord in the Blessed Sacrament. When I was learning the faith I was encouraged to 'visit' Jesus whenever I came into church – to kneel in his presence and to speak with him there.

Some of you may know that moving story about the Cure d'Ars, St. Jean Marie Vianney, and a young farmer who used to come into his church each day around noon and pray alone. One day, so the story goes, Jean-Marie's curiosity got the better of him and he decided to ask the farmer what he was doing there. He replied that he came into visit Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament in silence: *"I just look at Him, and He looks back at me."*

A profound declaration which recalls the message of S. Paul that *'All of us, gazing with unveiled face on the glory of the Lord, are being transformed into the same image from glory to glory, as from the Lord who is the Spirit'* (2 Cor. 3:18). We have John Jones to thank for making that message clear through the great East Window which reminds us that God wants to transfigure our lives as he shines on and into us. If, like that farmer, we let Him.

After all, this place is meant to be the 'House of God' and the 'Gate of heaven', yet do we consciously realise that we are in a place that is filled with the presence of the saints? Everything about this church speaks of hidden realities. Look up and notice the shape of the roof – an upturned boat, the Ark of salvation into which we are gathered just as the whole of creation was gathered by Noah before the flood.

Then consider the focus of our attention – the sanctuary and High Altar beyond the screen. These parallel the construction of the Temple in Jerusalem at the heart of which was the Holy of Holies set apart for the presence of God. The screen which stands before the sanctuary is similar to those in orthodox churches: beyond the screen and veiled from sight the mysteries of heaven are celebrated. There is a profound sense of movement here from the known the unknown, from earth to heaven, yet the heavenly gifts are sacramentally revealed in our midst. This whole building is designed to direct our attention to heaven.

Yet the holiness of this place is meant to remind us that we are called to holiness as well. St. Peter reminds us of this in his first Letter: *'like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ.'* (2:5)

CONCLUSION

Catholic Christians have the great advantage of external signs to remind us of what is to develop for us internally. If this building is just seen as a beautiful place in which to gather, then it has failed in what it is here for. We are not called just to come to church but to become what we are called to be – the Body of Christ. As the great S. Theresa of Avila said:

*Christ has no body now on earth but yours,
no hands but yours,
no feet but yours,
Yours are the eyes through which to look out
Christ's compassion to the world
Yours are the feet with which he is to go about
doing good;
Yours are the hands with which he is to bless men now.*

If you listened carefully to our gospel reading, or check it out later, you will notice that Jesus does not only describe himself as the good shepherd but also as the Gatekeeper who calls his sheep by name *out* of the sheepfold. These figures of speech concern both the nurture of the sheep and the fact that we are called by name into that freedom whereby we follow the shepherd wherever he may lead us. We bear the mark of the Great Shepherd on our foreheads – the cross given us in Baptism.

This church, and all it contains, is here to help mould us in our calling to be Christ in the world. May it constantly change us into what we are called to be.

Amen.