

OXFORDSHIRE HISTORIC CHURCHES TRUST

My first word must simply be 'thank you.' Where would we be without you? Those who have supported the Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust must be well on the way to having their names inscribed in what the Book of Revelation calls the Book of Life. You've been wonderful. Speaking just for the Church of England we owe you so much. We have 815 churches in the Diocese of Oxford and well over 300 of them are in Oxfordshire, and I'm constantly coming across churches that are deeply grateful to the Trust for their help, often right at the start of a campaign, and so a real encouragement. So again I say 'Thank you. Where would we be without you?'

You may remember the words of John Betjeman, best imagined to the tune of *The Church's one foundation*:

'The Church's Restoration in 1883, has left for contemplation, not what there used to be. How well the ancient woodwork, looks round the Rectory hall, memorial to the good work, of him who planned it all.

'Of marble brown and veined, he did the pulpit make; he ordered windows stained, light red and crimson lake. Sing on with hymns uproarious, ye humble and aloof, look up, and O how glorious, he has restored the roof!

Well the Trust has helped to restore many roofs, and kept many churches serviceable for new generations. Many of us get hopelessly nostalgic at the smell of old churches. My family used to go to a small country village in Hampshire for our summer holidays and as a small boy I'd go into the ancient church and be greeted by that distinctive

smell of old stone, slightly damp prayer books and last week's flowers. It's a heady cocktail to this day!

People love their churches, even if it's the church they don't go to. But why are they so important? Why have people loved them so much? 3 quick things:

1. It's the importance of place

It took quite a while for the Israelites to build a special place to worship God. David never managed it; eventually Solomon got his act together and built a fabulous Temple. God's response was to say 'my ears will be attentive to the prayers made in this place.' And that's what people have found in churches. They've been wonderful places to take our deepest concerns.

Sacred space and holy stones are special to most people and to their communities. 63% of people in a national poll said they would be very concerned if their church was no longer there. Jeremy Paxman said: 'Church spires are the great punctuation points of the English countryside. But the religious buildings of this country not only tell where we are geographically, they tell us where we've come from. They're often the only place in a community which has a living, visible connection to the past. They hot-wire us into our history.' Great phrase – 'they hot-wire us into our history'.

Churches have a symbolic value far beyond their address and postcode. They carry the emotional and spiritual investment of the community, reminding us of baptisms, midnight mass, prayer in time of war, weddings, funerals, harvest festivals. These places are holy ground even for the unbeliever; they carry people's sacred memories. Everyone here could tell stories of deep personal significance

connected with different churches. Maybe we could tell each other afterwards.

When I worked at Canterbury cathedral I was once walking through the cloisters and saw a man sitting quietly ruminating. I greeted him gently, but he came straight out and said, 'This place saved my life. Ten years ago I'd come to the end, and this place saved me.' It didn't seem right to push further. We were on holy ground.

That's why people care for these places so deeply, and commit themselves to their upkeep even if they don't go to worship. 86% of the population go into a church sometime in the year; 30% go to a Sunday service, 40% to a baptism, 50% to a wedding, and 60% to a funeral. These are well-used places. And I rejoice to see how many are being reclaimed by the community as places for music and meals, for farmers markets and celebrations, for food banks and even for post offices! And when there aren't many people around, there are always the angels, crowding the rafters and brushing gently against those who drop in for a quiet moment. If only we could keep all our churches open all the time...

Of course if God is as we say and present in every place, then we can meet God anywhere – on a mountain, in a living room, in the proverbial garden. Indeed in the United States they even have 'drive-in' churches for you to come to by car. The weekly news-sheet for one drive-in church had this wonderful request: 'Please do not start engines until the pastors have left the altar.' For most of us, however, it's a building that acts as a porch into the presence of the divine. Space opens up; time slows down; love comes through.

The local church is a theatre for life-giving worship. It's a centre for listening and forgiving. It's an arena for celebration and exploration, for the arts and for discussion. It's a demonstration of love in stone.

2. Churches are valued because of the importance of permanence.

In a world where so much is transitory and insubstantial (do you trust all your digital information being in a Cloud?), in such a world, our churches represent something more substantial and lasting. I listened to a man on the radio this week who said he looks at everyone he meets with the thought: 'Could what you do be done by a robot? Moi? Who knows?'

But underneath the fast shifting sands most of us look for some things that persist, that point to values and realities underlying the merely temporal and ephemeral. Churches are like that. The life and worship within them may change from century to century of course, but the love and service emanating from a sacred space, remains constant, a reminder of the constancy of God's love.

Moreover, it seems to me that in a culture that's obsessed with the present moment and the emotional 'high' that we can experience in it, churches point to a larger, more spacious and significant narrative. Churches hold together past, present and future in a way that little else does. When I was Archdeacon of Canterbury and a residentiary canon of that wonderful cathedral, civic officials would sometimes come and tell us that we had to do such and such a thing because we had to think what it might be like in ten years' time. A colleague used to say gently, 'Ah but here we think it terms of centuries.'

These churches locate us in a story with a past, but also with a future trajectory. Theologically we call it the Kingdom of God. It's what Jesus

spoke about constantly, a time when God's new creation will completely overlap the old, and the peace, justice and joy that God wants for us will be established. Now what that means in practice is pretty obscure, even in the teaching of Jesus, but he gives us lots of snapshots of a world put to rights – the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, the parables, the teaching. The trouble is we've got so used to the values of an upside down world that when God shows up we think he's the one who's upside down!

So our churches are a witness to the spacious narrative of God, who holds together past, present and future, and never lets go.

3. These places matter because of the importance of people. It's people who give life to buildings. Jesus met a woman at a well one lunch-time and their conversation got round to the difference between the Israelites worshipping in Jerusalem and the Samaritans worshipping on a mountain in modern day Nablus. And Jesus said, 'Let's face it; it doesn't matter where we worship, what matters is that we worship in spirit and in truth.' Worship is for people, not buildings.

Indeed, these buildings aren't the church. The church is something else. 'Here's the church and here's the steeple'. I know we're all very respectable but we were all children once, so come on, let's do it!... So the church is us, what's left when the building has burnt down. (That's not diocesan policy by the way). Buildings are marvellous but they're not actually what we're about. We're about people. Jesus met most people in the street. He did most of his teaching, healing, praying, chatting, thinking.. outdoors. He was even killed outdoors, not on a beautiful altar between two silver candlesticks.

A few years ago, I took part in the great Easter celebration in Durham cathedral; it was wonderful, the angels sang. But the following Sunday I was celebrating HC under a solitary tree in the middle of the Sinai desert, sharing the peace with fourteen pilgrims and four bemused Bedouin, and singing *Thine be the Glory* with gusto. We didn't need the building – we needed the risen Lord. Archbishop Rowan Williams wrote, 'What is the Church? It's simply those who have been immersed in, soaked in, the life of Jesus, and who have been invited to eat with him and pray to the Father with him.' No mention of buildings.

So you/we are the Church, and our churches would not be what they are without you, every one who worships and serves in one of our churches – every one gifted and special. But we need always to remember that we aren't here for ourselves; we're here for the community around us. That's why it's right that our churches are usually right at the centre of our villages and communities. That's why when the worship ends, the service begins.

So the churches of our county are hugely important – important as **places**, as sacred space, important because of their **permanence** in a transitory world, and important because of the **people** they inspire to serve the community. The Oxfordshire Historic Churches Trust has served these places magnificently for 50 years. Thank you to you, to committee members, to Chairs and secretaries and treasurers, and to the hundreds of people, indeed thousands, who have taken part in the church crawls and other fund raising events. Wonderful loyalty.

May God bless you, as you, the living stones, preserve the old stones, in the name of the Cornerstone, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.