

Soap operas. You know, entertainment for people who don't pretend they live in Surrey. Pretty much nobody will admit to being into soap operas apart from, possibly, the Archers which some believe makes them appear cultured, little knowing that the real cachet accrues from having listened to Westway. Soap operas: Improbable plots, more life-drama in a single episode than the average three-score years and ten. Soap operas: the bane of any church marriage ministry because no soap opera wedding can ever proceed without someone standing up and objecting that the bride's really in love with the best man; or his sister; or the bloke in the caff- pretty much everyone apart from the groom, or someone else rushing in just as the vows are being said to say that the groom is a) already married b) a murderer c) actually the bride's long lost half-sister. None of which, of course, ever happen in real life nuptials. Yet. I'm glad I'm touching this wooden pulpit.

So, soaps. Apart from a brief infatuation with Prisoner Cell Block H that was killed when it turned out you could only know when the next episode would be broadcast with the help of a with advanced mathematics and a tarot reading, and an even briefer teenage infatuation with Scott in Neighbours (I blame the hormones- I had some back then) which lasted a couple of days till I came to my senses. Apart from those brief forays, soaps have never really seemed to me worth my time and effort. I only ever catch them if someone else is watching them, and as Wei is hooked on reality TV - I know- the Rectory is pretty much soap free. Which explains the odour. No Corrie, Eastenders or Emmerdale then; but I do keep catching the end of 'Hollyoaks' as I eagerly await the slightly lefty doom and gloom of Channel 4 news. And Hollyoaks- though I can't tell you the character and can't tell you the context- is (finally getting to the point) where I heard the following snippet of wisdom:

"Some people say 'live your life like there's no tomorrow'. I say live your life like there's no yesterday."

That struck me as brilliant advice (particularly if you've had *my* twenty-thousand odd yesterdays) but it's unexpectedly problematic advice for practicing Christians. You see, we spend a lot of our times as Christians with our nose in the past. We do love, for example, a good anniversary in the church. In fact, most of the Christian calendar that we follow devotedly year after year is anniversaries— from Christmas to Easter, seasons to saints days, we're building our faith by remembering a time, an event or a person from the past, even though we're very often guessing or sometimes making up the exact date or how many actual years since the event happened or the person died or- with some saints- if they actually existed at all. All added up, a lot of focus on the past. Nowhere is this more visible than in our ancient church buildings. Last week we celebrated our 'Dedication Festival' celebrating that at some point in time probably just over a thousand years ago, someone decided that this chunk of rural England should be dedicated to the worship of God: and so it has been ever since. You would have been getting this sermon last had not the Bishop kindly come to do a confirmation.

Yet although everything from this building to our language to our books, clothes and manners is seemingly stuck in days of yore, the reality is that for Christians the past doesn't figure: there is only tomorrow. Our faith sees all of time and space moving inexorably towards a single point in the future the consummation of God's purpose for his creation. Christians are a pilgrim people, we are a people on the move, our faith is a journey and the only direction of travel is forward.

For Christians, there is only tomorrow.

It's unfortunate then that, for Anglican Christians what's round the corner is looking increasingly worrying. The Church of England, the historic heart of Anglicanism, seems to be locked, despite its best efforts, despite decades of evangelism, fresh expressions, emerging churches, central initiatives, diocesan initiatives, mission action planning, renewal and reform; despite all it does, the C of E is seeming locked into a nosedive of relentless decline. Hence the ever more desperate attempts to bring numerical growth to our churches. One of the latest wheezes that has been proposed, is for Auntie Canterbury to open ten thousand- you heard that right- ten thousand lay led house churches. Paid clergy and old buildings are apparently key inhibiting factors to growth. Get rid of the people in cassocks, get rid of the mediaeval millstones and Victorian barns and there's no limits to the spread of the Word. So the theory goes.

The last year and a half have been a challenging time, to say the least, for churches. Covid-19 has managed what even Cromwell couldn't- shutting down worship at St Mary's Beddington for the first time in a thousand odd years. We moved what we could online and onto the phone; we kept going what we could when we could, yet despite all that we've found is good in streaming and Zooming, whatever else this pandemic has taught us is that there is something after all to be said for church buildings. They possess a solidity, a permanence we do not: they will be here after we are all gone, and they were here long before we came along. The stones of this place are soaked in prayer, a thousand years of worship, a thousand years of eucharists and christenings, baptisms and burials, a thousand Christmases and Easters, Pentecosts and both small and capital 'E' Epiphanies, and though they are all in the past, they leave something almost tangible in the here and now, a line of worship inseparably connected to the universal church; of their time, yes, and always rooted in this *place*. There is something after all to be said for church buildings.

It's easy of course for buildings to become a will-sapping sore, a constant drain of energy and resources just to keep them standing. And then they can become nothing more than things for tourists to gawp at, a source of deflation and frustration for those of us charged with keeping a live a worshipping community. But buildings *are* important to those keeping alive the faltering flame of the faith. They give something to us that a front room or the back room at a pub, a computer screen or a tablet can't: they *enhance* our worship by positioning us - as material beings- physically on the pilgrimage, at a particular time, and place. You can see the road that's been

travelled. It's indefinable, but you can feel it. The early Christians met in each other's houses. *And they worshipped in the Temple.*

*Day by day, they spent much time together in the temple, they broke bread at home and ate their food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having the goodwill of all the people.*

The cliché you might have heard many times- certainly from my lips- is that the church is people, not a building. And that's true. Without you and your gifts, and all those thousands of others who have sat where you are sat now back a thousand years; without your dedication, there would be no St Mary's church, either the stone one or the fleshly one. But it's not either building or people the two intertwine to make the community what it is. A church building without people is a community centre or over-priced luxury flats. A church without a building is a personality cult or a dinner party. A church building *with* a worshipping community is living stones. The building that is dedicated to worship is a psalm in stone; prayer made concrete and visible, the dedication of a people in a place to their God made tangible. When the wind blows over the people they are gone, but their dedication fixed in stone outlasts each and every one of us.

At some point in time, just over a thousand years ago, this place was dedicated to the worship of God, and so it has been ever since. That matters. Not because 'it's what has always happened here', not because it's heritage or history or whatever. We're not, despite the odd costumes, part of the curious world of historical reenactment. It matters because as Christians we believe in the communion of saints, we believe that the worship of earth and heaven, of past and present and future are all one and the same, all caught up inside and outside of time in an ecstatic worship of God. Doesn't feel like it when the rain comes through the roof yet again, when the scaffolding goes up or the heating break down, but if you could glimpse the view from heaven, that's what you'd see: past and present and future all caught up in the unending song of divine worship.

For most people a mediaveal-Victorian church like St Mary's is locked firmly in the past; but turn the key of faith and you will see that it's actually all about the future. This is still a Christian place and for Christians there is only tomorrow.

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