

## What is the church for?

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Dedication Festival, 14/07/19

Last year we had a magnificent celebration for the 125<sup>th</sup> anniversary of this church. There was a splendid heritage weekend, a wonderful lunch, and I'm pleased to report that my heritage geranium has survived the winter and is blooming magnificently. And our preacher at last year's service was the new Bishop of London. This will be something of an anti-climax.

Thinking about the sermon for today, I had recourse to that very helpful visitor from outer space, who if he turned up today and looked around the country might very well ask 'What is a church for?' When I was training for ordination we never discussed this – I think we were all supposed to know the answer already. But what is it for? Is it the House of God? There is a long tradition of wanting to contain God so that we know where he is – something that goes back way before Christianity. Is it a sacred space? Yes, but isn't it interesting that you only have this when you have put up a building to enclose the space, and have therefore defined everything outside as not sacred? Is it the focus of religious practice? Yes, but not the only one. We can say our prayers together or individually anywhere, and many Christian groups meet in schools or community centres, or even the occasional pub or coffee shop. Is it a splendid piece of architecture – a part of our cultural heritage? Perhaps it's a shop-front for the Christian club (and a symbol of exclusion for anyone who doesn't fit). It may be the most time-consuming item on the PCC agenda, and a bottomless pit for money.

Does this sound cynical? Maybe – but that well-known visitor from another planet could be forgiven for coming to the conclusion that Christianity is the worship of old buildings. So many people talk about 'keeping the church going' when what they actually mean is keeping the building going when it wouldn't be difficult to find somewhere else to worship. If a church building is worth having at all – and remember that the early Christians met in each other's houses – it must meet several requirements. First, and most important, it must be available, accessible and welcoming. Then it must at the same time be a safe place, a challenging place, and a focus for Christian commitment and activity. (If you like, it must encourage consolation, inspiration and perspiration!) It must be fit for its current purpose. And above all, it should ooze prayer, so that everything that happens in it is surrounded and supported by prayer. Some churches have that "atmosphere"; others (disappointingly) don't. You can often tell within a few moments of walking in.

Any church exists at least as much for non-churchgoers as it does for its regular congregation. After all, it is pretty difficult to spot a Christian if you want one, but very easy to spot a church! Perhaps the most-ignored feature of the "Good Samaritan" story is the inn, which just happened to be nearby. It was a safe place to take the injured man. The Samaritan knew he could rely on it – even though he might never have been there before. It was staffed by people who were prepared to take care of anyone who arrived, no matter who they were, how they got there or what their circumstances might be. And at the same time it was a good meeting place for its regulars, who used its facilities, met, talked, told stories and made plans before going back out into the world to carry on their usual activities. Open, accessible, welcoming, functional and effective - quite a good model for any church, in fact!

Ultimately, the dedication festival can only partly be about the building, and perhaps even less about the saint or saints after whom it is named. It is actually about the dedication, commitment and perseverance of the people who really make up 'the Church', who have met here, befriended and encouraged each other, celebrated and sought consolation, come closer to God and survived times of difficulty. We can thank God for the people who had the vision to design, build, decorate, furnish, and maintain the church. We can give thanks for what the building means to us – particular memories, a special corner, a place of refreshment and renewal. And above all we can re-commit – re-dedicate – ourselves to God's service, inspired by what happens when we gather here to worship him, and then go out in peace to love and serve the Lord in the huge – and equally sacred – world beyond these walls.