

The Benefice Service. Sunday 30 July 017.

'Old and New'

"Every scribe who has been trained for the Kingdom of Heaven is like a householder who brings out of his treasure things old and new." Mt. 13.52

The Victoria and Albert Museum in West London has just opened a new entrance created by the architect Amanda Levett. It is a startling piece of architecture with sharp edges, mirrors and masses of light porcelain which gives it a bright Mediterranean look. Begun in 1919, the museum was created to give exhibition space to the best of the world's art and design for the enrichment of the Victorian population. Today, its 3 million visitors a year stream through the main entrance of the museum and now this new Exhibition Road Quarter entrance. Tristan Hunt, the new director inherited this project which has transformed an old boiler house yard into something memorable, exciting and worth the journey. Of course, visitors come mainly to see the treasures both old and new inside but access is now even more attractive and certainly easier.

A Church.

In our gospel for the last few weeks St. Matthew has been illustrating the nature of life in the kingdom of God. The Parable of the Sower, the Wheat and the Tares show God's profligacy with the good news and today we hear about the joy it brings and its power in society, the leaven working in the lump.

Most of us here are committed to our churches. We run churches, not museums. We are committed to safeguarding the good news of Jesus which comes to us down a tradition of 2000 years. But we safeguard it not by preserving it in formaldehyde or putting it in a glass case but by living it. Our churches may be ancient but the message which they transmit is electric, life-changing, attractive and transformative. At least, at our best, that's what we should be. And I say "we" because it is us that is the leaven, the mustard seed. It is us that are filled with the joy of finding the hidden treasure, the fine pearl. With that sort of attraction, people will find access through the most obscure entrances! As the first Christians realized the distinctiveness of this lifestyle, envious onlookers were heard to say, *"See how those Christians love one another."*

The treasures of the V and A are both old and new but they attract 3 million people a year. People came to Jesus because they found in him something challenging as well as wholesome. His sights were on the Kingdom of his father, not on the politics or consumerism of the day. His disciples were slow to see this, to understand his parables so he had to take them aside and explain things in detail. Eventually they realized that gospel living was distinctive and challenging in its difference. It's not that Jesus was suggesting the whole of the Jewish culture and belief was bad but some of it was lopsided. Regular prayer and bible study was good but it should be done in secret, in great humility. Access should be open to all; we must practise what we preach and be generous to a fault. This gospel living, using vehicles old and new, will compel people to come in. Our churches are all glorious without but the critical issue is the quality of life within. Externals are necessary. Morcott want a re-surfaced path; Barrowden will be snug in two years, Duddington shines like a new pin; South Luffenham want an inside tap and Tixover haven't a light bulb to share between them but all these extras are outweighed by the quality of the goods inside, both old and new.

A holy People.

We are called to be God's holy people but it is not just us who are called. The whole world is called to be holy but the responsibility for transmitting that message lies with us in the power of the Holy Spirit. So access is important as well as the quality of the message.

All our churches are several hundred years older than the V and A. That museum was created to improve the education of Victorian London. Our churches are there to transform the world, bringing it back to the ways of God. That is a huge task but we don't attempt it alone. As wood is transformed by fire into a glowing furnace so human kind is transformed by the power of the Holy Spirit. St. Paul's conversion on the road to Damascus was sudden; ours may take a lifetime of dogged commitment.

The spaces in which we gather as a church witness to the transforming power of Christ. This is the place where people are moved by the gospel, directed by the prayers of the saints and re-charged by the Body and Blood of Christ. You don't get that, even in The Kop! If you want to see fine examples of a Chippendale Chair, you need to go to Room 133 in the V and A. If you want to see examples of holiness you need to go to church which is where God acts. As one powerful orator recently said, *"The test of the gospel is not that it can make good men better but that it can make bad men holy."*

We stand on holy ground. Even the sceptic Philip Larkin, in his poem 'Church Going', remarked that, *"A serious house on serious earth it is..."* But how seriously do we take our holy witness? How eager are we to bask in the glory of God, to delight in the company of the saints, to sit on the edge of the pew expecting that God will act? There are many wonderful examples of godly life in this Benefice but frequent church going is not one of them. We have to develop more of a thirst for God. We can do it at home with our bibles and in our prayers but we also need the fellowship of God's holy people – to mix it with the good, the bad and the dangerous to know – if we are to be changed from glory to glory.

Let me leave you with a final thought. A visitor to Australia remarked that it was astonishing that the cattle didn't get lost in such a vast country. He received a reply that they won't stray far from clean water-holes. Amen.