

SERMON
Sunday, 12 July 2009
Thanksgiving Service for Building the Future
All Saints Church, Witley

Today is a day of celebration and thanksgiving for our recently completed church re-ordering project. Thanksgiving to God and to the many people He used to make it all possible.

We particularly thank, our architect, Michael Staff and the 12 people you may have seen around the site, Simon Swaffer, contracts manager for Ghinns the builders and Keith Robinson, the site foreman. We also thank those from our church who worked tirelessly and magnificently to see the project through.

On the building front we owe a huge debt of gratitude to David Snowball who, with great professional skill and deceptive ease oversaw the whole enterprise, ably assisted by Richard Fraser and the members of the building group.

On the fundraising front, we owe an equally huge debt of gratitude to Elizabeth Gibbs and her team who brilliantly masterminded a host of great events which brought in the money that was required. And Richard Fraser again was a great help with his work on numerous grant applications.

But I also want to thank each one of you who supported the venture either through attending events and making donations or through giving your time and effort. Your generosity and hard work have impressed so many people – including those from other local churches or schools who have remarked to me how unusual it is for a small church like ours to raise so much and achieve so much in such a short time. That's what can happen when a lot of people work together for a common purpose.

But let's remind ourselves of why we did it. Up and down the country, churches have found that people, in their busy lives, don't like moving from one place to another after a service for coffee but, if they're staying, they prefer to remain in the same place.

We had answered that need by doing coffee in church but we'd realized, how inadequate and even how dangerous our facilities for it were. On top of that, it's very unusual these days for a public building to have no toilet in it. In some cases that stopped people coming to church and it was awful having to send elderly or disabled people over the road – sometimes in bad weather – to find the loo.

Last and, of course, not least, there was a requirement for an area which could allow more flexible worship and simultaneously be a large, attractive multi-purpose space.

That brings us on to how that new space might be used. In our thinking, there have been a wide range of potential uses. We should note that they have often included the provision of food in church because it's often difficult to have activities – especially social events without food.

Now, as I've said, we've been having coffee and biscuits in church for years. We've also had teas at the Christmas sales where people used to say, 'It's a shame we can't extend the range of food we offer!'

But I know some of you have been uncomfortable at the idea of a full meal in church. And you've said, 'There's a difference between having a meal at home and one in church. And you know something? You're right. Of course, any meal you have with somebody else is special because a meal unites us in companionship with them. 'Companion' literally means 'eating bread with'. But, as you say, a meal in church is different from a meal at home or in a restaurant. A meal eaten here unites us not just with each other but also with God. The church can't become just another eating place. But actually the first church buildings were not church buildings at all but people's homes. The first Eucharists were not symbolic meals as we have today but real meals with bread broken and wine drunk in a home – a house context.

Providing we always remember God's presence with us in church – in His house – then sharing a meal here actually takes us close to the early expressions of Church.

By the same token, our thinking has included offering the church for use by community groups. Just as Jesus, in His earthly ministry, went out to meet people's needs as a sign of God's generosity, so by opening the church to community use without ever forgetting it is a church, we show God's generosity and kindness.

From past experience running a Christian arts centre in a church, I know it can be very poignant seeing people coming into a holy place for the first time precisely because they feel safe enough when it's for an apparently secular purpose. The same may happen here. And remember, God pervades all of the best human activity and creativity. You can't have 'religion' in one box and the rest of life in another. So in fact the sacred – secular division is and should be blurred and one would even argue that it is a false division.

So we'll consider community use. There are, as you know, other venues in the area with which we'll be competing, but they'll all have their own regular bookings while a place like the Jubilee hall is not for hire at all. Already we're getting enquiries.

Then, of course, there's our own use of the new facilities. There's no reason, why some of our regular fixtures shouldn't be enhanced by them. That would include the Mantsonyane lunch, the MacMillan coffee morning, the Christmas sale (as I've already said), our prayer group meetings and other group meetings like the PCC which has already switched to the church.

On top of those things, we could have Deanery Synod meetings, post-funeral refreshments and post-confirmation refreshments. (We'll be hosting a big Deanery Confirmation service in November, by the way).

To those could be added Lent lecture series. You'll remember that the 2008 joint service with Milford had to take place in their church because we lacked the facilities to host it. Or maybe we could have a new Christian-based lunch group with discussion of a particular service after school (very popular in some churches). These are only ideas at present – although September will see the launch of a weekly mother and toddler group called Little Saints meeting every Friday morning. It will include a children's act of worship.

Talking of children, the visits to All Saints by our two church schools would also be improved by what we've done. In fact, it's already happening. Last month's Chandler Fun day happened here and was much easier to organise than previously. As for the Infants' School, the head teacher has asked me if the refurbished church could host the annual meetings of staff with parents, thereby underlining the fact that they are a church school. And just three days ago, 90 children came here to enjoy the stories told by the stained glass windows.

These old windows bring me to my final point. In this building project we have created a really beautiful and huge new space. It has an atmosphere of its own and one of the paradoxes is that this modern building work has not harmed an ancient church. Quite the reverse in fact. The new works have revealed the beauty of the old building. What was cluttered and hidden before now stands out. Just go and stand at the end of the South Transept and look around and you'll see for yourself.

And it's proved to be the most natural thing in the world to start giving Communion at the High Altar for the first time in 40 years. People say they love that.

We are privileged to be the inheritors and stewards of a church which dates back to 1050. (American tourists can't get their heads round that). Every age before us had adapted All Saints to meet its needs. We stand in that tradition.

Again, I thank all those who have overseen and supported the project so skilfully, imaginatively, conscientiously and patiently. You can be very proud of what you've done. You are creating a church for the 21st century. Our prayer is that God will do the unexpected with it and for His purposes over the years to inspire and deepen faith in Him. He's certainly blessed it this far. Amen