

Admit It, You Think Judas is Right: Sermon Preached at St John's, Devizes, Sunday 3rd April 2022 (Fifth Sunday of Lent)

Readings – Isaiah 43: 16–21; John 12: 1–8

“Why was this perfume not sold for three hundred denarii and the money given to the poor?”

Admit it, a large part of you agrees with Judas when he asks Jesus this question... keep that in mind, we'll come back to it!

If you have seen television news reports from Kyiv, you will doubtless have seen the magnificent St Michael's Golden-Domed Monastery. A huge trapezium of sky-blue with white vertical stripes, all capped by seven golden domes, and next to it an even bigger clock-tower in similar colours with a truly huge golden dome on top. It was originally built towards the end of the 11th Century, a few decades before our own St John's, and like our St John's it was developed in fits and starts over many centuries. It was hugely expanded in the ornate Ukrainian Baroque style which make Kyiv's churches and monasteries a delight during the 18th Century, the period when many of our beautifully carved wall memorials in St John's were erected.

What I'll tell you next is hard to believe, although we have learned in recent weeks the depth of hatred Stalin held for Ukrainian culture and identity, but those wonderful 18th Century baroque extensions were used as an excuse for the Soviet authorities to declare the monastery historically “inauthentic” in 1934, and it was demolished, replaced by a modern office block housing the administrative headquarters of Soviet Ukraine. What we see today has been entirely rebuilt over the last thirty years, as faithfully as possible to what was there before.

On one level, buildings are just stones: but they are also things that can move people to tears through their beauty, and be the repositories of the soul of a nation, or a family, or a faith. Stalin, among others, understood how much

buildings mattered – St Michael’s was one of thousands of churches destroyed across the Soviet Union in the 1930s, as the state tried to destroy Christianity. But he also understood the power of beautiful buildings to lift up and renew. Much of the centre of Kyiv was destroyed during the Second World War, and it was the site of one of the first rebuilding efforts in the immediate post-War years, especially around the famous Maidan, a handsome cityscape of optimistic wedding-cake towers and neo-classical pillars. The aim was to incarnate in stone the beauty of Communist ideals of progress and enlightenment, and inspire the people of Ukraine to play their part in rebuilding the USSR after the depredations of Hitler.

Let us turn the clock back even further, before the construction of St Michael’s in Kyiv and St John’s in Devizes, before even the times when Christ walked the earth, to the time when the Scythians were the people who dominated the great Eurasian plain, from Ukraine in the west as far as Mongolia in the east. A few years ago there was an exhibition of their art at the British Museum. The Scythians had no writing, but worked gold with exquisite skill, the equal of the Greeks and Persians of the same period. Complex depictions of Tree of Life, sometimes a foot high, reveal a people with a keen sense of spirituality and the wonder of creation. The instinct for beauty seems to be hard-wired into us.

Our Old Testament reading this morning gives us part of the reason why, when it talks about the creation that God made, the jackals and ostriches, the wilderness and the rivers that run through the desert; these are beautiful things made by God. We human beings are made in God’s image; part of that is that we have an instinct to create beauty. We take the God-given objects of stone, soil, metal, and organic matter and use our God-given creativity to mould them into churches or jewellery or glades of trees on hilltops.

Most of you will know by now that I am very keen on walking in our local countryside. Walk along the Wansdyke from the top of Morgan’s Hill, down the opposite side of the radio masts from North Wilts Golf Club, on a spring early evening and behold a panorama that lifts the heart to the divine realms. The

open vista of well-managed farmland in the foreground, the Lansdowne Monument crowning the scene, and in between the glacial ridges and rills of Calstone Down. God and humanity in harmony with one another and with nature to create a little intimation of heaven.

So let us turn to our Gospel reading. We are always inclined to sympathise with Judas here, that wealth should be spent on the poor rather than – of all things – expensive perfume that will only be noticed for a day at the most. Surely if Jesus were a kind, decent, person he would want the money spent on those whom it would feed for a night. It is the sort of reasonable question that we hear often, and indeed that the Communists of the USSR asked of the churches there back in the day.

Yet beware when you hear the Church told not to spend money on beautiful buildings, or beautiful things in general – for when do you hear Hollywood told by the same people to spend less money on special effects in its latest blockbuster and give it to the poor instead? Or a rock star less on their stage show? Did anyone suggest top-slicing the budget for *Line of Duty* to support foodbanks? Do people demand professional footballers take a small cut in their vast salaries so the poor can enjoy the game for free on terrestrial telly?

People are quite happy for money to be lavished on the entertainment business and professional sport, which are the real religions of our time. When they castigate the Church for spending money on the creation of beauty, they may just be having a pop at the Church, or perhaps even a pop at the idea that beauty matters at all. It seems dangerously radical to say this in the current climate of the Church of England, but beautiful churches are instrumental in bringing people to Christ. Yet the official policy of the Church downplays the importance of the churches we have inherited, and we no longer build new ones.

The last flowering of church-building in this country came in the twenty years after the war. Those modernist temples of concrete and glass were oft-derided, yet the best of them had real positives, in particular a careful attention to the

movement of natural light through the building across a day. Who could fail to be moved by Coventry Cathedral, or Le Corbusier's palace of light at Notre-Dame du Haut, or Niemayer's Space Age dreamworlds in Brazil? More recently, in countries where churches are still being built apace, they have shared secular architecture's 21st Century tendency to marry the barest boxy functionalism to spreadsheet principles, resulting in ugly indoor arenas in vast car parks. We can, I hope, do better than this in the decades to come.

So let us return to our Old Testament reading – God says “I am about to do a new thing”. In this case, he would indeed soon return the exiles from Babylon to Jerusalem; yet they returned to a different Jerusalem in a different world; no longer the centre of a strategically significant sovereign state, but a peaceful backwater of the mighty Persian Empire. Just as the resurrected Christ was not a mere resuscitation, new life in God always seems to be in important respects different in character from what came before.

Therefore, while I have confidence that God will lead the Church into a “new thing”, a new era of building and beautifying churches, but I have no idea what that will look like. When it starts to emerge, I implore you to open your imagination and creativity to its possibilities, including for St John's. Most of all, I implore you to resist the naysayers who demand that the Church abandons beauty, for the desire to create beauty is one of the ways in which the Church shares most deeply in the nature of God.

Now praise, glory, and honour be to God who is with us in the wilderness and on the streets, in times of plenty and times of austerity, in all the earth and for ever and ever. Amen.