

## “Living Stones”

A sermon preached by the *Revd Dr Mark Butchers* at All Saints' Wytham on 13<sup>th</sup> May 2012, at a service celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the rebuilding of All Saints' Church.

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I don't know how many years ago it was that I first visited All Saints, but it was long before there was any hint that I should become Rector here, as well as Vicar of St Peter's Wolvercote. I still remember that first visit and my reaction, which was 'what a gem!' It struck me as a beautiful church, immaculately kept and obviously very much loved.

Today we are celebrating the 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the building of this church by Montague Bertie, the 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Abingdon. Many of the materials used to build it are in fact considerably older, including some of the stonework for the windows and doorframes from the ruins of Cumnor Hall. The arch we walked under to enter the churchyard dates from 1572. There is glass which predates 1812, some of the roundels from as early as the 14<sup>th</sup> century. And we have memorials from the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries in the chancel walls and floor, all moved from the old church. The 5<sup>th</sup> Earl of Abingdon was obviously a canny recycler long before it became fashionable.

In its history since 1812, this building has developed and evolved in subtle ways. Churches are a bit like human bodies. Our cells come and go over time – that's why we change and age. I'm not sure what the rate of change is, but I know that the cells we have in our youth have long since been replaced by middle age. Yet within that change, there is continuity through our DNA, such that we are still identifiably the same person.

This church is no different. It has retained its identity throughout the last two centuries, even though the tiles on the roof have been changed, the pews replaced in the 19<sup>th</sup> century and new windows introduced – the one by the organ was installed to mark the 100<sup>th</sup> anniversary in 1912. One window in memory of Hazel ffennell has even come and gone. And of course in the last few weeks we have begun installing the long-awaited loo in the vestry. Churches are never completely static despite their appearances. Like bodies, they have a living, unfolding history. But there are a couple of other ways in which building echo bodies in an almost personal way.

The first is to do with memory. Church buildings carry the memories of a community. Just think of the services which have taken place here in the last 200 years – all those baptisms, weddings and funerals; the Sunday by Sunday worship; the special occasions at Christmas, Easter, Harvest, Remembrance Sunday, and All Saints. All of these are occasions when either as a family or as a community or both, people have come into this building to mark key events, to make commitments, to celebrate lives beginning or mourn lives ended, or to remember and give thanks to God for all he gives us in Christ.

We'll all be able to name and remember such occasions in this building, as could those who lived and worshipped here before us. This building holds those memories for us. And in the registers for baptisms, weddings and funerals; in the plaques and the British Legion standards on the walls; in the memorial tablets on the floor, it holds the memories of those who have gone before us. We didn't know the Bertie family;

there are few left now who knew the fenells; and yet we are connected to them through this building and the memories it preserves. That is a crucial role in a world of change.

The other way in which church buildings echo living bodies is summed up in the word character. Churches, especially one like this, do have a particular character. I would say that is rooted in something theological. Even though God is everywhere, at all times and in all places, his presence can also be focussed in an intense way, like the rays of the sun passing through a magnifying glass. That can be in particular people – the saints; or in particular objects – the bread and wine of Communion; or in particular places, including church buildings.

Because of that focussed divine presence within them, churches take on a sacred character. And when we come into the stillness of a building like this, we come with a deeper openness to that, deeper than if we were entering a shop or office. The building conveys the presence of God to us and we are more open than usual to receive it.

That evokes a prayerful response in us which will vary from visit to visit. Perhaps we'll give thanks, or express our hopes and loves, or share our cares and burdens, or speak of our despair and grief. God listens to that, and the building almost seems to listen too. Somehow that interaction between us and God is enabled by this building. And then in turn that interaction further deepens the character of this building as a sacred sanctuary, a special place, holy ground. Certainly we feel that subjectively inside ourselves, but the stones seem to absorb it and exude it objectively as well.

So for both these reasons – holding memories and its sacred character – this church is more than mere stones. And somehow, quite mysteriously, there is a living relationship between us and this building. Hence we talk about it in the same terms as we do about a person: we care for it, we love it, we respect it, we look after it.

Of course, there would be no building here at all without the living stones mentioned in our second reading: “Ye also, as lively stones, are built up a spiritual house, a holy priesthood...” Lively stones are the people who down the centuries have joined themselves in faith and worship to Christ the cornerstone and become his followers. Because of their faith, commitment and creativity, these stones were shaped and built into this beautiful building.

In this generation we are those living stones and one of our responsibilities is to love, care for, respect, look after this building. Obviously our predecessors in the 18<sup>th</sup> century neglected that responsibility and the old church had to be replaced 200 years ago. Apparently such neglect was not uncommon in that period. Thankfully church buildings are in a far better state now, thanks to awareness of conservation, the work of English Heritage, greater national prosperity and real commitment from a wide range of people. That includes both those who would call themselves Christians and those who wouldn't, but who feel that the church building is crucial both to the heritage and sense of community in their village. In Wytham, the Friends of All Saints play that vital role and I do want to acknowledge that and say thankyou to all involved.

In a small community like ours, it's not easy to keep a building in good condition. The task is not made any easier by government cuts, however necessary they are: until last year, we could reclaim all the VAT on roof repairs; now it is barely half. That makes a huge difference when money is tight.

And we do have a big challenge over the next few years to raise enough money to re-roof the north side of the nave and the chancel. I'm confident we'll do it though, because I know how this building is loved not just by local people but many visitors as well. I'm not the only one who has walked through the door and thought "what a gem!"

So today in this 200<sup>th</sup> anniversary celebration, let's treasure the memories this building holds, the character it exudes, the sanctuary it affords. Let's recommit ourselves as living stones to love and care for these sacred stones. And let's thank God for all that this church of All Saints means to us and evokes within us.

Amen