

Crossing the Floor: Spiritual interpretation of church buildings

CTA Convention Workshop
16th November 2010

Crossing the Floor

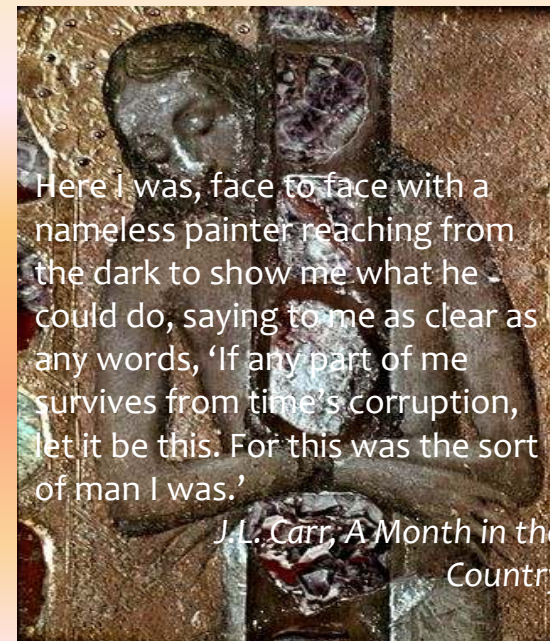
- enhance the visitor's perception of building as sacred space
- explore 'crossing' as both sanctifying a building and also the journey from tourism to deeper spiritual connection
- recognise the Christian tradition's attitudes (and ours?) towards sacred buildings
- explore potential for spiritual interpretation in a place of worship known to us and connections we hope to create

Fortingall Kirk and Yew tree



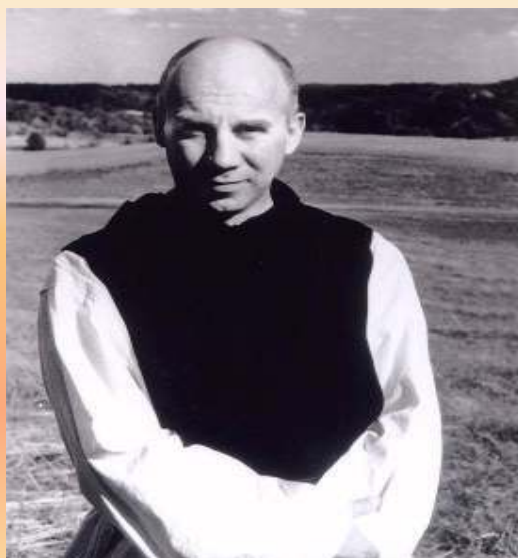


I'm a spiritual atheist; I don't believe in God but I do believe in us. I believe in human beings. On a spiritual basis, I think we do get a connection. Is it a mystical connection? I'm not sure.

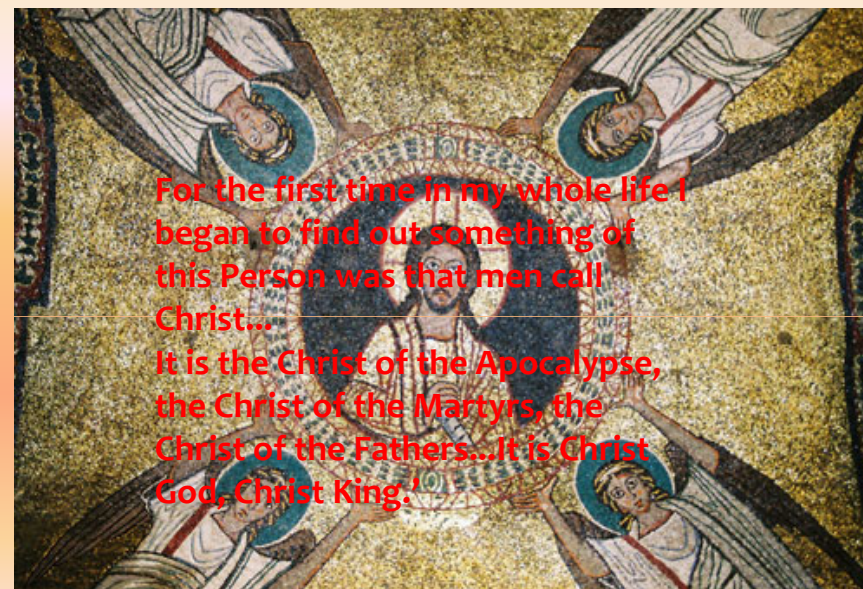


Here I was, face to face with a nameless painter reaching from the dark to show me what he could do, saying to me as clear as any words, 'If any part of me survives from time's corruption, let it be this. For this was the sort of man I was.'

J.L. Carr, A Month in the Country

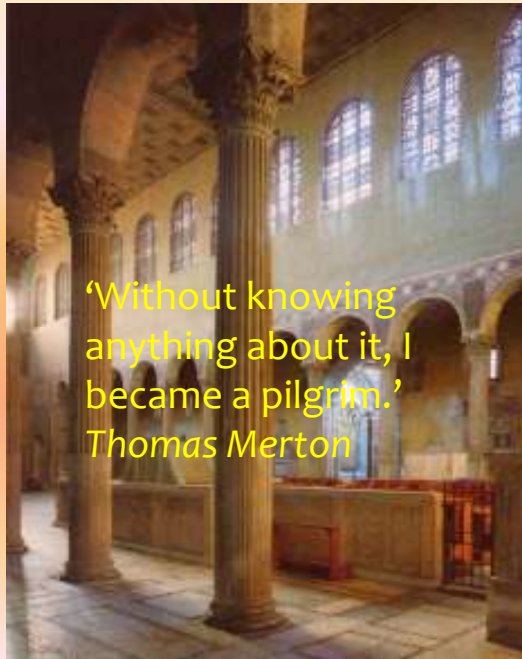


Crossing the floor: from tourist to pilgrim



For the first time in my whole life I began to find out something of this Person was that men call Christ...

It is the Christ of the Apocalypse, the Christ of the Martyrs, the Christ of the Fathers...It is Christ God, Christ King.'



'Without knowing anything about it, I became a pilgrim.'
Thomas Merton

Merton's Journey

- Openness and space
- Personal exploration and research
- Engagement with Scripture and tradition
- Experience of peace and yearning
- Place and posture for prayer

What was the role of spiritual interpretation in Merton's conversion experience?

What would our stories of buildings and finding faith be?

'the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain, nor in Jerusalem...those who are real worshippers will worship the Father in Spirit and in truth.'

John 4



One of Jesus' disciples exclaimed, 'Look Master, what huge stones! What fine buildings!' Jesus replied, 'You see these great buildings? Not one stone will be left upon another: all will be thrown down.'

Mark 13

'if the Christian Church has indeed been disobedient ...it has been gloriously disobedient, erecting in every corner of the world countless buildings, all of which have a special character of their own, most of which enable their users to glimpse the glory of the Kingdom, and...bring people to their knees in wonder and thanksgiving to God.'

Richard Giles



However...

- Jesus frequently worshipped and taught in religious buildings. They are useful for worship, but should not be allowed to become its focus.
- If a church is a community connected to the Father through the Son and living through the power of the Spirit, then its building can bear witness to this relationship. The task of spiritual interpretation must be to reflect these connections and present them to visitors in a non-exclusive and inviting manner

Stream 1: Classical

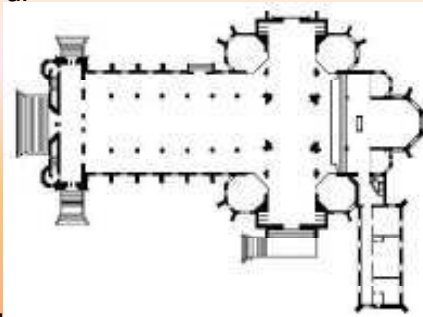


Civic: Basilica

Ship-shape: Apostolic Constitutions c.375 A.D.

Traditional: elements of synagogue and Temple

Stream 2: Medieval



Incarnational: building as body

Real presence of Christ

Visual participation in gospels and
communion of saints

Intimacy, openness and concealment

Stream 3: Reformed



Back to basics simplicity

Auditorium for Word

Nave as chancel for priestly people

All 3 streams feed into most of our churches

No wonder they can appear such as mess!

‘All these buildings are ours, and ...they are not going to go away. We have indeed a rich heritage, the potential of which we must maximise for the Kingdom of God. This must be held in tension with our Christian calling to travel light as the nomadic people of God...

We should not complain...the problems is one which serves to remind us how fascinating and exciting it is to be a Christian in this moment of history.’

Richard Giles

Some more questions

- ❖ How can we untangle these streams and explain their impact on a church building to visitors and regulars alike?
- ❖ How can the beliefs and struggles of the past encourage reflection on faith today?
- ❖ How can these buildings be utilised to provide a unique presentation of the gospel and invite a personal response ?



The Broadside Benefice
4 medieval parish churches
1 medieval church/arts centre
1 visitors centre
2 ruined towers
1 church school
PRE 1836 (2008)
1 priest and wife (in OLM training)

Visitor Centre Committee
3 guides at Ranworth
Culture of welcome
Good guidebooks, postcards

Developing Interpretation

- ❖ Establish aims and team
- ❖ Knowledgeable, sensitive, spiritually-minded guides. Further training and development
- ❖ Signs of welcome and statement of mission
- ❖ Invitation, resources and special places of prayer
- ❖ Telling gospel stories through objects or events
- ❖ Create displays that are ‘organic’, authentic and coherent with what a visitor might encounter on a Sunday morning
- ❖ Enable visitors to leave their mark

Final questions: getting stuck in

- ❖ What object or story in a church familiar to you would provide a starting point for exploring the gospels?
- ❖ Helped by spiritual interpretation, visitors can gain a sense of a community's relationship with God, experienced in a particular place, often over many centuries. How can we convey some of this richness?

WORKSHOP

Crossing the Floor: Spiritual interpretation of church buildings

[Title Slide]

[Crossing the floor Slide]

The aims of this workshop are to :

Enhance the visitor's perception of building as sacred space

Explore 'crossing' as both sanctifying built space and also the journey from tourism to deeper spiritual connection

Recognise the Christian tradition's attitudes (and ours) towards sacred buildings

Explore potential for spiritual interpretation in a place of worship known to us and connections we hope to create

This workshop will be illustrated by 3 short case studies and 3 times for group discussion and questions.

[Fortingall slide]

Case Study 1: Fortingall Kirk and Yew

Fortingall yew is oldest living thing in Europe (5,000 years), standing next to Arts and Crafts movement Kirk, containing ninth century Celtic Saint's bell, Pictish carvings and memorial to military lairds of World War 2. Fortingall was also a legendary birthplace of Pontius Pilate. It offers a beguiling mix of history, legend and connection with Christian and pre-Christian worship stretching back to time immemorial.

Churches are often the oldest building in a community, iconic places whose stories and contents preserve that community's 'spirit' in a very broad sense. Their beauty and strangeness can captivate believers and non-believers alike, giving rise to a sense of connection that could also be described as 'spiritual.'

Fortingall stands in remote location in Glenlyon, Highlands. Like majority of Britain's ancient church sites, it stands in a rural area with a small population

struggling to maintain it, possessing few resources for publicity and interpretation. E.g. welcome notice. Yet the place can somehow speak for itself. It is within helping that process that the work of spiritual interpretation in small communities lies, and much of what will be discussed in our third section will focus on what can be achieved with limited means.

[Paul Jones slide]

But first we need to define some terms. To 'interpret' means to explain, translate, or represent. 'Spiritual' is much more elastic. The term 'spirituality' emerged in nineteenth century France to define medieval mystical treatises, and grew to absorb popular devotion, but has continued to grow exponentially. Paul Jones, lead singer of Manfred Mann in the 1960s, was a strident atheist who began to recognise spirituality in art, a God-given creativity, leading to his conversion 25 years ago. [quote]

[Eddie Izzard]

However, closer to the present, Eddie Izzard, comedian and man of many parts, described himself in an interview as a 'spiritual atheist.' [quote] Spirituality and atheism are no longer mutually exclusive. I've met avid, knowledgeable and helpful atheist church-hunters who would share in this often unfocussed, non-transcendental form of spirituality.

[J.L.Carr slide]

In J.L. Carr's *A Month in the Country*, Birkin, the fictional restorer of a medieval doom painting, is a survivor of shell-shock and a failed marriage, who restores himself as much as the wall painting. A non-believer, he is unmoved by the religious context but finds affinity with the unknown painter [quote]. In our fragmented world, churches can offer a satisfying sense of re-connection with the past.

Before we interpret our buildings spiritually, we must know where we are coming from. It may be where we feel others may come from, or confessionally, from within our own faith tradition of mission. I suspect for many involved in ministry to visitors, the old spiritual 'alchemy' of turning tourists into pilgrims remains a strong underlying motivation. As I said at the beginning, most of ancient churches may be in the care of small, traditionally-minded congregations who cannot be there at all hours and may feel shy of discussing their faith. If the building can be a mediated space, through which their faith can be communicated to others, so much the better.

This leads to our second case study, of someone whose conversion occurred in this context, Thomas Merton.
[Merton slide]

Following his parents' death, Thomas Merton visited Rome as a 17 year-old, before entering Clare College, Cambridge. He followed the cultural tourist trail around Rome and was deeply disappointed with its extravagant treasures. But to his surprise, Rome's ancient churches moved him deeply, and their mosaics haunted his imagination.

[Christ King slide]

Eager to understand their images, he bought a Bible. The Gospel stories strengthened his sense of connection with them, and more than that, he found profound peace and a sense that somehow he belonged there. He wanted to light a candle and pray, but worried desperately that he might be seen.

[Santa Sabina slide]

One morning, in the fifth century Church of Santa, he could contain himself no longer. He later wrote, 'although the church was almost empty, I walked across the stone floor mortally afraid that a poor devout old Italian woman was following me with suspicious eyes.' He crossed the floor to the altar rail and said the Lord's prayer many times. [quote] He went on to become a Trappist monk and spiritual writer.

What were the features of Merton's journey that we can draw lessons from?

[Merton journey]

Openness of building and space to explore without interference

Personal quest backed by his own research, which

Involved engaging with scripture and the Christian tradition

Physical action involving movement, posture and prayer

Questions

Here are two questions drawn from this case study for us to consider:

What was the role of spiritual interpretation in Merton's conversion experience?

What would our stories of finding faith within buildings be?

Merton's pilgrimage began through connecting with Christian scripture and tradition, so this section looks briefly at how these have combined to form what we have today.

[Woman at well slide]

If we are to interpret our churches from a confessional perspective, we first need to come to terms with the gospels, and Jesus' apparent ambivalence towards religious buildings. In John 4, he tells the Samaritan woman at Jacob's well [quote] that worship would be located in spirit and in truth.

Worship would be centred on the presence of God within the church, the assembly of believers. Jesus was less impressed by Herod's temple:

[Temple slide]

[quote 1] Jesus' words were about inevitability of its destruction rather than gloating over it, a reminder for all time that buildings must fall and only God is eternal. However, within two centuries Christ's ambivalence would be supplanted in many places by Christian enthusiasm:
[quote 2]

Church buildings have become an iconic element in the Christian tradition, a sign of the Church's mission.

[But slide]

[quote 1] Jesus frequently worshipped and taught in religious buildings. They are useful but never ends in themselves.

[quote 2] To express our mission in a Trinitarian way, we might say that if a church is a community connected to the Father through the Son and living

through the power of the Spirit, its building can bear witness to this relationship. Therefore the task of spiritual interpretation must be to reflect these connections and present them to visitors in a non-exclusive and inviting manner.

In other words, what we believe undergirds everything we do here, but what we do is also intended for you, the visitor, if you wish it to be.

The Christian tradition has given us three principle streams that flow through our buildings.

[Classical slide]

Rejecting the idolatrous connotations of classical temples, official Roman Christianity adopted the civil basilica as building for its assemblies, with Bishop as God's local magistrate. The church complemented the town hall as public space dedicated to God's sovereignty. Its internal layout, laid down in the Apostolic *Constitutions* of 375 A.D., was in the shape of a passenger ship, and its furnishings derived from elements of the synagogue and Jerusalem temple.

[Medieval slide]

The highly incarnational emphasis of medieval worship re-shaped the basilica. Just as the Christian church was likened to a body, so were its buildings, leading to changed proportions and greater compartmentalisation. Participation in worship was highly visual, conducted in small intimate spaces, the open expanse of the nave, concealed behind the rood screen. Worshipers imagined Christ's passion, saints and angels enacted in their time and locality. Incidentally, this slide shows the plan of a college chapel in Australia, as Gothic moved from being an international European idiom to a global genre.

[Reformed]

Within the Reformed stream of building, we may also include the Catholic Church since Vatican II in its quest for back to basics simplicity. Its elegant lines and plain spaces invite an interior, personal vision of faith devoid of shared imagery. In Protestantism, the nave becomes the chancel for a priestly people and an auditorium for the Word, which governs worshipping life. This slide shows a Dutch Reformed Church in South Dakota.

[All 3 Streams slide]

All three streams feed into most of our churches – no wonder they can appear such a mess! If we think of a small medieval village church, fenced in by Victorian pews and dominated by the marble monuments of the great and good, we stand where the three streams collide. The traditions they represent may no longer be live in the congregation of today, but local feeling and strong conservation bodies have preserved many churches in Victorian aspic, where they are likely to remain, however worship and faith may continue to develop. Indeed, this impetus to conserve constitutes a fourth, largely invisible but only semi-permeable stream. But Richard Giles reminds us, we should not complain: [quote]

This leads us to further questions:

[Some more questions slide]

How can we untangle these streams and explain their impact on a church building to visitors and regulars alike?

How can the beliefs and struggles of the past encourage reflection on faith today?

How do we make the best of what we have? How can these buildings be utilised to provide a unique presentation of the gospel and invite a personal response?

Our third and final case study will be the small rural benefice in which I minister.

[Ranworth slide]

One of my churches, St. Helen's, Ranworth, frequently appears on TV series as diverse as Griff Rhys Jones's *Rivers* and Richard Taylor's *How to Read Churches*. Visited by over 50,000 every year, it contains one of England's finest rood screens, a medieval lectern and the only Antiphonal retained in its pre-Reformation home. It is academically well-known and later this month, there will be a new interpretative venture, the Ranworth Symposium. Ministry there could be a full time job, especially between April and October, but it comes with: [quote 1+]

3 other medieval parish churches, a medieval church/arts centre, a visitors' centre, two ruined towers, a church school and PRE of 1836, served by me, my wife, in training for Ordained Local Ministry, and a Reader.

On the plus side, it has a strong tradition of visitor ministry, and [quote 2]

A Visitor Centre Committee, 3 guides at Ranworth, a legacy of good literature and postcards.

Spiritual interpretation usually has to take a back seat, as it will in almost any rural multi-parish benefice. There is generally little time or money to devote to this ministry, but much can be achieved with goodwill and some simple resources

So how can interpretation develop in this type of setting?

[Developing interpretation slide]

Establish aims and team

What is your objective? Who will work with you? (but if it's just you and the unseen angels, so be it!) However, if that's the case, will the church 'own' your approach?

There is no near substitute for knowledgeable, sensitive and spiritually-minded guides. Their recruitment and continuing training should be a priority. However, good, locally produced resources can also provide authentic communication.

Signs of welcome and statement of the church's mission should greet the visitor. These should be home produced wherever possible, rather than 'off the peg.'

Churches may be intended to be houses of prayer but it isn't always obvious to visitors where and how to pray. An invitation to pray, a designated comfortable, discreet area with simple, tidy resources, a prayer trail through the church may transform a visit.

Objects within the building may lend themselves to telling a Biblical story or important event, e.g windows [display boards from St. Mary, South Walsham]

Create displays and notices that do not dampen sense of wonder and discovery, that connect 'organically' by being sensitive to their surroundings. Their spirituality should be an authentic reflection of the beliefs and practice of the

church community and coherent with what a visitor might encounter in Sunday worship there. Displays should be temporary and change periodically to give different insights.

Allow visitors to leave their mark, in visitors' books, prayer cards, maps.

[Final Questions slide]

What object or story in a church familiar to you would provide a starting point for exploring the Christian faith?

Helped by spiritual interpretation, visitors can gain a sense of a community's relationship with God, experienced in a particular place, often over many centuries. How can we convey some of this richness in our setting?

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N. Garrard 14.11.10