

HERITAGE AS A VEHICLE FOR MISSION

Extended notes of a keynote address given by Bishop Colin Fletcher, Bishop of Dorchester at The Churches Tourism Association Convention 19-21 November 2012, The Hayes Conference Centre, Swanwick, Derbyshire

First of all may I thank you for inviting me to join you at this Conference. Apologies that I will need to leave at tea time. General Synod calls tomorrow – I need to be there to pray, to speak, to cast my vote and to be alongside all those affected by the result. Thank you too for all you do as an Association. Thank you particularly to John – personal thanks too that he suggested the title for this talk: 'Heritage as a Vehicle for Mission'.

Being a historian I am always careful to define my terms. Heritage: I think first of our built heritage. 16,000 parish churches plus Cathedrals, Abbeys, Minsters, etc. Many other church buildings belonging to Sister Churches. Not just built heritage but as you state on your website also churchyards. The natural and man-made environments. Then of course there is that heritage that consists of all that we have inherited from our forebears – music, art, written words, etc. In this talk I focus mainly on built heritage – new and old – and touch on the natural and man-made environment.

If that is heritage, then what about mission? One of the dangers of the word 'heritage' is that we limit it. There is an even greater danger with the word 'mission'. It usually becomes a bit of a battlefield. It is either used exclusively to refer to evangelism or some choose to omit that element. I want to include it but not leave it at that. Think in terms of the 5 Marks of Mission. Let me remind you of what they are:

1. To proclaim the good news of the Kingdom;
2. To teach, baptise and nurture new believers;
3. To respond to human need by loving service;
4. To seek to transform unjust structures of society;
5. To strive to safeguard the integrity of creation and sustain and renew the life of the earth.

Which of these connects in your mind to heritage?

(Delegates were then given the opportunity to talk to their neighbours as to their response to this question).

While you are pondering that I tell you a little bit about myself: I have been the Bishop of Dorchester for the past 10 years – Dorchester, Oxfordshire not Dorchester, Dorset, so I am Bishop of places like Witney, Burford, Chipping Norton. Prior to this I was Archbishop George Carey's Lambeth-based Chaplain and before that Vicar of Holy Trinity, Margate. Looking further back in my life my father took us on church crawls. My grandfather in his retirement had bought a house with the remains of a Carthusian monastery in its grounds (Hinton Charterhouse). By the time it came to me he had established the outlines of the main buildings and most of the cells.

I joined with enthusiasm in working out how the sewers worked! I have to confess this does make me one of a fairly specialist group of people who do get enthused just by the buildings themselves. Challenges, it seems to me, are at least two fold when it comes to thinking about heritage as a vehicle for mission: there are those who will know a lot about a building's history and its constituent parts, and feel that all that matters is in Pevsner or an architectural guide; there are a far larger number who know very little about its architectural story - or the reason why fonts, pulpits, altars and lecterns exist – yet who come to visit, and wonder, and pray. The challenge in both cases is to help them discover more.

Not that we are unique in facing this sort of challenge. Dame Fiona Reynolds said this as she came to the end of her time as director general of the National Trust: 'Every director-general has had the ability to take the Trust into a new generation. My thing has been to help us love people – our love of buildings has never been in doubt, but we didn't used to love our supporters enough. We're now more warm and welcoming and I am most proud of the way we've adapted to the challenges of the 21st century while remaining true to our founding principles'. That's not a bad summary for churches as well, especially at a time when we can be faced by antagonism as well as praise. Writing in The Independent in reflecting on Justin Welby's appointment, Joan Smith said in passing 'Most of us never set foot in any of the Church of England's buildings except as tourists'. She concluded her article: 'When he was Dean of Liverpool, Welby once gave his blessing to a Hallowe'en service entitled 'Night of the Living Dead' in which a man in a gothic costume leapt from a coffin. The zombie church? It's a great metaphor for an institution that steadfastly refuses to modernise'.

So what does this huge mixture mean for those of us engaged in seeking to use Heritage as a Vehicle for Mission? It doesn't take much knowledge or imagination to know where we are failing miserably.

It's a June weekend in the Cotswolds. We've stopped at a village pub – or are staying in a local B and B. We are going for a wander in the village to see what's there. We spy the village church, a very obvious landmark. The notice board doesn't give much

away though its clear that it could do with a fresh lick of paint. The churchyard also feels unloved and unkempt. We go to the obvious door at the West End – nothing to point us to the South Door and its porch. So we try that West Door and its locked. Nothing daunted we go round the side and find the porch. Again we are not filled with excitement – there is a notice telling us about a Lent Bring and Share lunch back in March and a letter from the DBF thanking the church for its contribution of £5,617 to Diocesan funds in 2009. There is no sign of an instruction of where we might get a key. So we determine to try the door, willing to take the risk that there is probably not much going on. We get inside and the pattern of what was outside repeats itself: basically it says loud and clear ‘This building is uncared for’. There is a heap of flower vases or old oasis in one corner; there are undistributed copies of a diocesan newspaper in another. What flowers there are have seen better days.

I could go on, but I won’t. I have to admit that it’s largely a caricature but there are enough elements that make it instantly recognisable. The twin-fold tragedy is both that those who do worship there have either ceased to notice, or quite like it – but alongside that there is more than ample confirmation for the Joan Smith’s of this world that here is an example of an institution that refuses to connect with this generation. And yet the situation is far from being hopeless. There remains a power and an integrity in these buildings and their surrounds, that still means they can be powerful tools in mission. Happily I see that as a Bishop there is much that is going on that is very good indeed, and the message, like it was for the National Trust, is that we need to love the people who come into our buildings and invite them into a still richer experience. So what things are giving me hope in this context of Heritage as a Vehicle for Mission?

Let me list four things with a number of examples to each:

1. The state of the buildings themselves.

Prior to the restoration of Dorchester Abbey in the mid 19th century first by Butterfield and then by George Gilbert Scott, James Cranston did a survey on the building. He reported that the Abbey had suffered greatly from neglect and natural decay, and that some parts were unsound and dilapidated. The medieval roofs had been lost; the chancel and sanctuary were in a poor state; even the lead in the windows had been allowed to decay to the point where the stained glass was at risk. On the outside, if an engraving of 1823 is to be trusted, parapets and turrets had already crumbled and bushes were sprouting from the walls. At that point give thanks for our Victorian ancestors who saved so many of our parish churches and Cathedrals during the latter part of the 19th century. They may have been over zealous at times, but without their work we would be looking at many more ruins

today. Dorchester Abbey might well have been in the hands of English Heritage rather than the vibrant parish church it is today.

But look at our buildings today and there are on the whole in amazingly good condition. Thanks to quinquennial inspections, the work of churchwardens and PCCs, they are in better condition than they have been for centuries. Because they are, they make a very positive contribution to the mission of the church. Their good maintenance is a precondition for mission. So often in so many of our towns and villages they remain as the key public building. They look cherished – and they are cherished. Their maintenance a precondition for mission. Without that undergirding they would be incapable of doing all the things that they have the potential to do in helping us, to quote Dame Fiona once again ‘to love people’. This gives me hope.

2. The fresh realisation that our buildings are there for communities, not just for congregations.

Here I admit that I am speaking out of a particularly Anglican perspective. Those here from other traditions would have to reinterpret what I am saying from their own perspectives. But the parish church was always there for the parish – not just for those who chose to worship in it. Here I realise that I am moving on to contentious ground but I don’t need to remind you that the parish church – and in particular the nave of the parish church – has hosted all kinds of events down the centuries. Schools, mystery plays, markets, all had a role to play. One of the less beneficial actions of our Victorian ancestors was to fill the nave with pews, meaning that flexibility was lost. It also emphasised a secular/sacred divide. The church was left for services: secular activities had to move to a different building, eg. the Village Hall. I will resist going off on a long diversion about this. A few chances were taken at the Millennium to redress this, but many more were missed. I am glad to report that the move to give greater flexibility back to our buildings is now unstoppable.

You may have been a report about Deddington Church in the Church Times a fortnight ago. It livestreams its services. Someone watching on the web saw a small fire had started. They summoned the fire brigade who watched it on their i-phones but they got there in time and I am assured it did very little damage. What the story didn’t say is that part of the Farmers Market is held there every month, a village festival, concerts, and computers for village use. The place vibrates with life. Stadhampton is a village with no community hall. It has an under-used church. Plans are going forward to the nave to be leased as a hall for the community. Kitchen and loos are to be put in. In Stoke Row the school is next to the church. The school has no hall and it is landlocked. Now is does have one Monday to Thursday. The church, a small Victorian ‘barn’ with no pillars, does the job admirably. We are hoping we can achieve the same in time in the more complex medieval church of Lewknor

where one way to get into it is across the school playground. Think too of St. Mary's, Witney. It is a huge medieval building that lies next to Henry Box secondary school. They are short of performance space. What about the church next door? But I mustn't prejudice the results of next month's consistory court! These are the bigger projects. Once we've done a few of them more will follow – heating systems, the creation of flexible seating. To these add dozens of loos and coffee-making facilities. Congregations wanting them – both for themselves and for their communities.

3. Interpretation of buildings

I take issue with Joan Smith's disparaging comment that most people only enter church buildings as tourists. This simply is not true in my part of the world. As Christmas approaches well over 50% of the population of many villages will be at a service or event sometime over the next 6 weeks but even if people do come just as tourists the challenge is to make the building come alive. Here we face a problem. What brings buildings alive are people, and people in particular doing things other than looking at them. Its people at worship, people having meetings over coffee, toddler groups and groups for the elderly, however you define that age group. Display boards can help. Having people on a rota to welcome visitors is a definite plus and it also increases security. At Burford we made a short video – the Vicar welcomes, and it shows something of the worship there on a Sunday. Looking back we needed a bigger screen and a really good place to show it. But its expensive. Audio-tours are another possibility but again really expensive. The good news is that technology is moving very fast. In the last few weeks photographs of church interiors have been developed by Chris Jones with Leicester Diocese linking them via Google Streetview. At Dorchester Abbey Chris Whatmore of Viewpoint is developing a phone and i-Pad APP tour of the building. The War Graves Commission are planning some experiments so that you can get the story of a person through your i-phone.

At the same time there are lots of opportunities to invite people to pray, guides to take people to different parts of a building, let them know what a font is used for, and the pulpit, lectern and altar; let them see, if you happen to have one, the squint that would have been used by lepers. The key thing is to bring the building alive. Historical guides have their place but they are not sufficient. Use them in conjunction with other leaflets – prayers guides or something about what Christianity is about. Tell stories from members of your own congregation. There are a huge number of possibilities.

4. Seize Opportunities

Some of these are connected with what we do well anyway. Take weddings for instance. I am delighted that 'qualifying connection' has opened up all sorts of fresh

ground. I realise that it can be a pain if you have a particularly photogenic church especially when linked to a good place for receptions. But before going all negative, let's look at the possibilities, not least because of the missional as well as the financial aspect. Or to go to the other end of life and beyond – what about death and communal memory. I have already mentioned churchyards. Of course they have a strong environmental aspect to them particularly in towns and cities though also in the countryside. Have we got a guide to our graveyards? Again with a story to click on to? Other things we have got are war memorials – certainly in Oxfordshire many are still recognisable village names. Are we gearing up for 2014? What about the Church's calendar? Gloucester Diocese has produced some wonderful material on 'Experience Easter', 'Experience Christmas'. Why not use websites 'A Church Near You', 'Carols Near You'. Then there are festivals: Christmas tree festivals, flower festivals, next year the first Chilterns festival following the example of the Cotswolds one. Think of the energy generated by the Olympics and the Jubilee. How can we channel and use these afresh?

I realise that I am running out of time. Wherever you look you can connect mission and heritage, make the latter a vehicle for the former. Some of the Marks of Mission are more difficult to translate than others when thinking of the links between heritage and mission. I give you a few examples:

No. 5 Integrity of creation – the presentation and care of churchyards, and don't forget to look at heating systems;

No. 4 Unjust structures – maybe displays, maybe stories. We can't all have the wonderful corner in Salisbury Cathedral dedicated to the prisoners of conscience but we may have our own local story to tell;

No. 3 Loving service – we just need to tell our story;

No. 2 New believers – we won't in the main suddenly convert people, but we may well be an important stage in their journey;

No. 1 Proclaim good news – yes in every way that we can. This good news has been available for centuries. We have to ensure that it will be for centuries to come.

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