

50th Anniversary of the York Minster Fund 29th March 2017

Check against delivery

A friend who held a senior position in the National Trust was comparing numbers. She contrasted the four million members of the Trust with the less than a million who attend a service in the Church of England each week. She said, 'Our members love historic buildings and they love nature', then added with a mischievous smile, 'I thought yours did too! So why haven't you got as many?'

It's a serious question worth pondering by the leaders of the Church of England.

But what the York Minster Fund has demonstrated over the last fifty years through the millions of pounds it has raised is that this iconic and historic building has powerfully and effectively pulled at the strings of both the heart and the purse of the people. The question though that we should take from this anniversary is whether it will continue to do so.

Everybody here will have a different reason for loving this building. For me it was the place of my ordination as bishop 23 years ago. I remember being allowed to choose one of the hymns and asking for what was then a relatively new one, 'There is a Redeemer'. There was some discussion about how suitable it might be for congregational singing as it had never been sung before in the Minster, but the choice was allowed and the song duly printed in the Order of Service. But so unfamiliar were they with it that when it came to printing the composer's name they inserted the words 'Da Cappo' which were in fact the instructions for the guitar!

Such a cameo shows the challenge that those of us who love this building must not duck: how do the custodians of the Minster embrace the people of the present and the future, their hearts and their purses.

There's no doubt that Cathedrals and this Minster continue to attract large numbers of visitors. And I know that across the country there are many initiatives to turn tourists into pilgrims who will begin to sense the spiritual dimension of the building.

I remember hearing of one couple in Liverpool's Anglican Cathedral approaching the stand of candles. As the man began to light his candle his wife whispered loudly in his ear, 'Don't forget to make a wish'!

And here's a profoundly theological question, 'what IS the difference between a wish and a prayer?'

But what it shows is that there is a spiritual instinct in people that begins to show when they enter such a magnificent building that has been built to the Glory of God.

Indeed, such is the grip that a holy building can have on the soul that there is no other way of expressing it except to say in the words that Our Lord used of the Temple in Jerusalem:

"Zeal for Thy House has consumed me."

Jesus was quite clear that this House of God should be for everybody.

That view was quite a novelty in his day. For example, people with disabilities and diseases were not allowed in. And the Temple authorities had so filled the Court of the Gentiles with trading stalls that those of other faiths and races were denied their own sacred space and excluded. That's why he overturned the tables and wouldn't let anybody move through. Not because he was against commerce (how could he be when trade and commerce are essential to society?) but because he hated discrimination and outsiders being excluded. And that's why he pointedly quoted from the Prophet Isaiah saying,

“My House shall be a House of Prayer for all peoples.”

The other lesson from this episode of cleansing the Temple is that whatever else you do in and to the building it must not take away from its primary purpose which is to pray and to worship God.

And here lies the secret to the Minster's future. Of course, we look to others to help but can we really expect these partners to be 'consumed with zeal' for this place?

Will the State step up to the plate as they do in many European Countries? Unlikely in the present austerity.

Will the Church Commissioners? Given what's being said about Guildford Cathedral that's not very hopeful.

Will those who book the Minster for corporate events dig deeper? Well perhaps.

Will the visitors who pay for admission give even more? Possibly.

Will the members of the Minster congregation take full responsibility for the future of the building? That would be exceedingly generous of them and not matched by any other Cathedral.

So, the big question remains: who will be consumed with zeal for this place?

This evening's psalm 122 began, "I was glad when they said unto me, 'We will go into the House of the Lord'". It feels as if it could be the anthem for the York Minster Fund. It echoes psalm 84, "O how amiable are thy dwellings; thou Lord of Hosts! My soul hath a desire and longing to enter into the courts of the Lord".

These are the songs of pilgrims in search of the invisible God.

The journalist AA Gill once wrote about faith saying that it was like a piece of string that disappears into the clouds and every now and again tugs a little.

As we all, at different stages of life, search for faith and grope towards God we find him frustratingly invisible and intangible. But the beauty of this Minster is the way it responds to our seeking and stirs our soul with its majestic architecture. The Minster is the manifestation of God's majesty. It is the Glory of God in stone. It gives our faith something tangible and visible to behold.

And I suppose that is why we are all here because to one degree or another this building has touched and gripped us and given us a zeal for it. It has helped us draw near to the invisible God.

And if that is so, if that piece of string has tugged a little in this place, then may I ask you – and myself - 'what great price would you put on so excellent a gift?'. For surely, there is no greater purpose in life than to come near to the living God.

The Right Reverend James Jones KBE

