

Opulent Worship!

Isaiah 60¹⁻⁶; Psalm 72¹⁰⁻¹⁵; Ephesians 3¹⁻¹²; Matthew 21-12

Although I am the very least of all the saints, this grace was given me to bring to the gentiles the news of the boundless riches of Christ. [Ephesians 3⁸]

Happy New Year! This will be an exciting year for St Mary's as we progress with our re-ordering of the Nave. What a joy it will be to be warm and to have space for worship and for fellowship in a space that others will be able to use.

Is this something that we can justify - spending £1.4 million (or thereabouts) on a Church building?

Rumeena was a 6th form student on a RE trip to St Paul's Cathedral in London. She had never been in St Paul's and the impact of the opulence of the place made her exclaim, 'My God!' At precisely the point that our host and guide, Canon (now Bishop) Martin Warner approached us. 'Precisely!' he said. 'That is what this place is for!'

The question was then asked by the group - how can you justify the cost of a place like this? Would the money not be spent more effectively on relieving poverty or hunger? The response acknowledged the enormous expense in building and maintaining places of worship, but said that money could only be spent once. An inspirational space for worship is there for many and speaks to the soul and lifts the eyes to God. The poor do need to be fed, but they will still need to be fed the day after the money runs out.

Everyone will have their own way of justifying such expenditure: most of us want to be warm; some want to be more part of the Eucharist as the centre of our worship together; others want space for creativity; and still others want space for hospitality and involving the community.

My justification is based on worship: the quality of our worship - the space; the music; the liturgy; our expectations - all say something about the sort of God we believe in and have come to worship. A scruffy building and a casual approach always speaks to me of a careless God, while loving care and thoughtful preparation speak of a God that is more dependable (I did know someone who once said that on a first visit you could 'smell' how good a Church was!).

✠ The readings today speak of the opulence of the worship of the Magi. You will have noted that both Isaiah and the Psalm point forward to this moment and they are quite specific about where they would come from and about two of the three gifts that they would give. What made these potentates - travelling using a star-based sat-nav, expecting to meet a new king and arriving prepared with treasure chests for such an event - part with gold, frankincense and myrrh for a seemingly ordinary infant in very ordinary circumstances in Bethlehem? It was encountering Jesus, who inspired them to worship (in their homage and in their gifts, both *proskuneo*).

✠ Paul celebrates with some enthusiasm the inclusion of the Gentiles in the community of faith and, of course, we recognise that today for the Magi weren't Jews! In his addressing the Church at Ephesus he speaks of the **boundless riches of Christ** that is at the root of God's grace. It is this that is our inspiration in generosity. Could you afford to be a Christian if you had to buy in? No! But your membership is paid for in the infant Jesus - when the shadow of the cross was over his crib.

How opulent is our worship? What is the cost that we are prepared to pay in time, in energy, in money, in love as an outward and tangible response to God's love shown to us. Second best will not do! Half-heartedness will not do! Stinginess and meanness will not do! Why? Because it will reflect badly on us? No! Because that is never what we say about God!