

H A P P Y ? I N G O D ' S H O U S E ?

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The Sermon preached by

The Revd Charles Robertson

[Minister of Canongate]

at the celebration of the
Tercentenary and Refurbishment of the building

in the presence of

Her Majesty the Queen and His Royal Highness, The Duke of Edinburgh

30 June 1991.

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Text: "I was glad when they said to me,

'Let us go to the house of the Lord.'

[Psalm 122: 1]

Maybe aye !, maybe no !

Not everybody has been so pleased to go to church.

Here, for instance, is Patrick Geddes telling us that

"The kirk of my boyhood in its bleak ugliness had a very depressing and repellent influence. I remember, as a child, saying that a church with no flower garden and trees was no church for me; there was nothing to look at outside, and the interior was even worse."

Or, here is LS Walmsley:

"In the chapel of my childhood, there was not one inch of flaming glory of colour to help me make my angels; I could and did create ghosts from an erratic gas lamp in the farthest dark corner under the gallery."

Grim ghosts and absent angels ! -
and all because the church was dark and dreary.
And if your kirk is like that,
it is no wonder that you take a scunner
both at it
and at the religion it represents.

But what about this kirk now
after its great renovation ?
No doubt John Donne
was speaking out of his own experience
when he wrote:

"Churches are best for prayer that have least light;
To see God only I go out of sight."

There are times
when a certain dimness in a church
might suit a sombre mood.
When sadness grips you
or anxiety troubles you,
you may be relieved to slip unseen
into some lack-lustre church
and find, all unnoticed, a quiet corner.

But for the most part,
our spirits cry out for light,
for form,
for colour,
for uplift.

Some of you may recall
Austin Farrer's astonishment
when one day he saw a huge poster
in Oxford Station
with the words "For Separation and Uplift".

He wondered for a moment
if British Railways
had decided to promote the Church; for to his mind the slogan,
"For Separation and Uplift",

seemed to be a perfect description of the Church's purpose.
But on closer examination,
the poster turned out to be
nothing more than an advertisement
for a certain item of ladies' underclothing !

But the Church IS for uplift.
Its purpose is to help us
LIFT UP OUR HEARTS TO THE LORD;
and every church building
has a part to play in that purpose.

I hope you will agree that this church building,
this lovely old Canongate Kirk,
fulfils its part superbly !

There is no diffusion of gloom here,
no dreary darkness for ghosts to lurk in,
no dull drabness to repel the spirit;
but radiant light
and cheerful colour everywhere,
and space enough for myriads of angels
to turn their spangled wings !

Here the beauties of the building mysteriously and profoundly
bring their powers to bear upon the human spirit.

The majestic curve of apse and arch,
the quiet lines of moulding,
the solid strength of the pillars,
the play of light upon walls and pews, -
all conspire to touch the heart
and help the worshipper
in the search for God.

The very exterior of the building,
with its cheery, swooping gable and gilded antlers,
makes the passer-by in the street
feel refreshed
and released for a time at least
from the pettiness and drudgery of everyday life.

It is a building
that makes you happy just to see it;
and to be in it brings you peace.

The place itself bestows a benediction:
the harmony and the symmetry of the building
steady the jangled nerve
and cheer the jaded spirit.

You come here
with hurt feelings or anxious thoughts,
and the building works its magic:
serenity steals over you,
tranquillity ensues,
and all is peace.

Somehow you are in touch
with all the associations of 300 years
of praise and prayer,
of promises made and benefits received,
and you begin to see things in truer perspective.

You sense something of the gentle power
and quiet strength
described in Emerson's lines:

"Here holy thoughts a light have shed
From many a radiant face,
And prayers of tender hope have spread
A perfume through the place."⁵

For my own part,
I know of no other building
where Whittier's prayer is more readily
and more frequently answered:

"Drop thy still dews of quietness,
Till all our strivings cease;
Take from our souls the strain and stress,
And let our ordered lives confess
The beauty of thy peace."

And so, I for one am always glad
when they say to me,

"Let us go to the house of the Lord !"

But before we sink completely
beneath a welter of sentimentality,
the building itself calls us from our reverie.

Its vitality, its solidity,
its upward thrust and overarching strength
draw us outward and upward
into the presence of God Himself.

The very simplicity of the building,
the purity of its lines,
the economy of its design,
the grace of its arches,
the power of its pillars,
the luminosity of its windows,
the spaciousness of its arrangement -
all combine to bring us
face to face with the Eternal:
and in this building,
with its welcome and its openness,
we discover in Faber's words, that

"The heart of the Eternal
is most wonderfully kind."

His purity and grace,
his welcome and light,
his beauty and strength ,
are all reflected here;
they are given to us by the building itself,
and sealed to us in Word and Sacrament
as week by week we meet to worship Him.

But what is it all for ?

Not just for private devotion,
not just for worship;
but also for mission.

When Doctor Neville Davidson preached here
on the 14th of June, 1950
at the last great renovation,
he took as his twin themes,
worship and evangelism.
His message holds true today.

The old Scots proverb reminds us that
"Bonny birds are aye the warst singers."

Well, we have perhaps
the bonniest kirk in all broad Scotland;
and we have also a bonny song to sing,
the song of God's love in Christ.

Let us prove the proverb wrong;
and from the bonniest kirk,
let us hear not the warst singers,
but the brawest.

And let the song of God's love
shine in our lives
as well as sound on our lips.

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1 Quoted in "The Church Architecture of Protestantism"
AL Drummond. T & T Clark, Edinburgh 1934, p 154

2 Ibidem, p 155

3 Ibidem, p 159.

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