

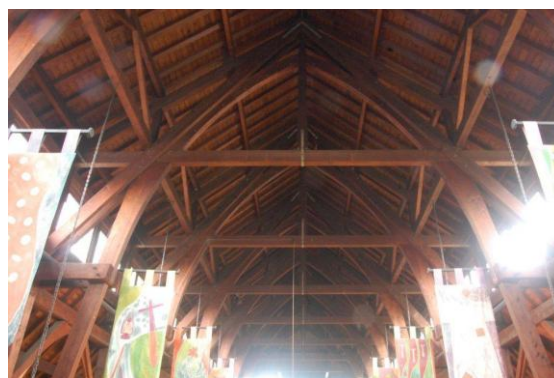
Sermon by Fr. James Coutts, assistant curate 1964-1967



How important, do you think, is a smile or a greeting? Well – perhaps it was my face? Or my threatening appearance? Or was it just the dog collar? But when, as a curate, I walked back from the daily morning Service in the Old Church to 18 Farndale Crescent (the curates' house), my efforts to catch the eye and greet those scurrying past me to the station, evoked no response, no 'Hello', no 'Good Morning'. I used to think that my failure to communicate with them, perhaps reflected the separation between the local Church community and the thirty thousand Greenford inhabitants. Even though we were a team of five priests, three Sisters (including Penny

the corgi, who used to yap noisily at other people entering the Old Church when the Sisters were in there, praying), three Church Army workers and four Ordinands – all of us being incredibly busy with services, schools, Scouts, Boys' Brigade, Guides, Youth Club, Men's Society, Women's' Fellowship, sick visiting, Gilbert and Sullivan – and sometimes six weddings a Saturday at half hour intervals (how did the photographers manage?) – despite all that busyness, the Church community and the local population seemed two separate groups. Did the Church community undergird and animate with its values, the local community?

And then there was this other thing I got totally wrong. My image of this New Church was of an upturned boat – given the difficulties Fr. Harris went through getting the wood here from Canada during the War, perhaps it was not an entirely inappropriate image. But my image was of the Church as a boat, a life-boat, taking those on board through the choppy waters of this world to the safety of the next world. Whereas, actually, this church building is surely more like a tent, a tabernacle, a place of meeting, where the next world, God's Kingdom, bursts into this world; a tent that is the beginning of God's Kingdom, pitched here in Greenford.



New Church Photo: Ray Allen

Our then Rector, Father Oman, used to welcome to the Rectory visiting priests from America and one of the bits of knowledge I acquired was the American expression, a 'Steer's Head sermon' A Steer's Head sermon being a point here and there, and a lot of old bull in between. This morning I would like to leave with you three points, about this building, this tabernacle, this Church community, becoming more of a beginning and a foretaste, of God's Kingdom here in Greenford. And, so that you can remember the three points more easily, I am going to give them to you in a foreign language, after all, you've had quite a lot of foreign languages already in this Service.

The first point was written long before the Old Church was built, by a North African bishop, Augustine, long before the Arab, Islamic, conquest of North Africa. And it is very brief – 'Persona est relatio'. You can easily guess what that means – in order to become a human being you have to be in relationship. A relationship does not mean pressing buttons, completing forms, achieving targets: it does not even mean being friendly. A relationship means acquiring and exercising the skill of making friends; a relationship means hospitality, commitment to the other person, responsibility for the other person, intimacy. Being prepared to enter conversations with people. Conversation is a more and more important skill in our culture, which



St. Augustine

is increasingly becoming fragmented into little groups that only speak to others inside that group. But every single human being we meet, comes to us, not just as a special creation and gift of God's, but as a unique glimpse of God's face. Jacob says to his brother Esau, who has forgiven him the huge hurt his brother Jacob has done to him, 'I have seen thy face as though it were the face of God'. To become human, we have to be in relationship.

The priests who served the Old Church in the Middle Ages, would have read my second point, which was proposed by one of their great theologians, Thomas Aquinas. Aquinas wrote, ' Three qualities are necessary for beauty: integrity, harmony, radiance. (Ad pulchritudinem, tria requiruntur: integritas, consonantia, claritas). Beauty is not something we can apply to the outside of a person, a relationship, or a building. Beauty is an interior quality that emerges from the inside, out. And a beautiful person, a beautiful relationship, a beautiful place or view, comes into being because it has these interior qualities of integrity, harmony and radiance. And of course, we recognise this beauty in holy people and in holy places. And it is your beauty and the collective beauty of this congregation, and the beauty of this holy place, that is going to bring God's deeply longed for beauty, to your fellow citizens in Greenford.

And the third point comes from the oldest language spoken in these islands, a language spoken before either the Romans or the Anglo-Saxons arrived: And it is one of the oldest proverbs we have: ' A fob ben bydd bont'. Which means, 'If you want to be a leader you must become a bridge'. What happened was this: a British princess married an Irish prince who treated her badly: so her brother got together his war band and sailed across to Ireland. But when they reached Dublin, they found that the bridge across the river Liffey had been broken down. So the prince lay down across the river, and as his war band tramped over him, muttered, 'If you want to become a leader you must become a bridge'.

By being ready to be the first person out of the trench, the first to enter a relationship, the first to enter the emotional no-man's land, the first to take the risk of greeting people, the first to invite people (with your words or by the silence of your example) into this tabernacle, this place of meeting, you become a Christian leader. And in this tabernacle, this place of meeting, you will be face to face with absolute Beauty, God-in-Jesus. For it is here that you will grow deeper into a relationship, not only with the beauty of other human beings, with the beauty of the creation, with your own beauty, but with the mind of Jesus. It is here by prayer, by study, by worship, by serving the poor, that you will receive the gift of becoming human, the integrity, the harmony, the radiance, of the mind of Jesus. So it is here, that you will receive the vision and the courage, to lie down in the chaos, the filth, and become a bridge.

Well, let's finish with a fourth quotation – this time from a Greek theologian which sums up everything we've been thinking about and which will, actually, be a description of each one of us in a few moments time. Having received Holy Communion, the life of Jesus, into himself, St. John Chrysostom asked himself, 'Why do I need to talk about heaven, when I myself have become heaven? Each of us will leave this tabernacle, more of a human being, in relationship, receiving integrity, harmony, radiance becoming heaven. What more could either Fr. Harris or any of us, want from our celebration of seventy years of worship and serving?

Fr. Donald Harris
Rector of Greenford Magna
1936-1945

