

*A sermon given by The Right Reverend Dr Martin Warner, Bishop of Chichester, at the Corpus Christi Festival at St Mary's, Bourne Street, on Sunday 23 June 2019 at 6.00pm.*

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A deep affection for St Mary's, Bourne Street was awakened, in my genuflectious youth, by the strains of Betjeman verse, extolling Travers Baroque:

*The fiddleback vestments a-glitter with morning rays  
Our Lady's image, in multiple-candled brightness*

Being mildly coy about such romantic statements, I was bemused more recently to hear a godly, learned and rather austere theologian describe this building, enthusiastically, as “a beautiful church”. Here was someone I thought of as solidly at home in the functional austerity of the more reformed expressions of modern Roman Catholicism; temperamentally, you might say, more inclined to polyester than antique silk.

But the immediacy and force of that theologian's assertion have intrigued me ever since. What did it mean?

“Wisdom has builded her house.” These words are heavily freighted with significance when read through the lens of Christian revelation, and I think that they hold the answer to my question about this church as an expression of beauty.

From at least the fifth century AD the image of Our Lady in art has portrayed her as the *Sedes Sapientiae* – the seat of wisdom. It is in her womb that the Wisdom of God takes flesh and is given living space within the confines of our time and experience. The beauty of the Blessed Virgin is derived from her role as the mother of Wisdom. “Here is the shrine and altar, the glorious Virgin's

lap, where the saviour of the world is laid to be adored and worshipped”, in the words of a Cambridge theologian, the 17<sup>th</sup> century Anglican priest, Mark Frank.

What gives meaning and power to the decorative splendour of this church is the quality of its theological beauty as a house of wisdom. Its beauty does not, ultimately, reside in the Travers baroque or the glittering fiddleback; those things are symptoms of the theological beauty to which the building directs us, so beguilingly, and which is remarkably and potently displayed in the tabernacle and crucifix that demand our attention. We see the house of wisdom, where the Blessed Sacrament is reserved, wherein

“lies hid the sacred body, lies hid the precious blood,  
once slain, now ever glorious, of Christ, our Lord and God.”

And in the crucifix we see that body, the *Corpus Christi*, that is given to us in the Eucharist.

The beauty of these objects is not material, static or quantifiable: it is to be seen, rather, in the effect that these sacred artefacts have on our lives. Their beauty is, properly speaking, the signs in our behaviour and priorities of the operation of grace whereby the Holy Spirit reveals in us the perfect beauty of the children of God and our common life as citizens of the kingdom of heaven.

And here are two aspects of this beauty that are, I believe, intrinsic to the celebration of this Corpus Christi Festival. The first is the beauty of comfort and the second is the beauty of memory and desire.

The beauty of comfort speaks tenderly to us about the redemption of pain, injustice and death. So the words of the prophet Isaiah reverberate around the body of Christ in the silent crucifix: “Surely he hath borne our griefs and carried our sorrows”.

In the Church of England’s inherited liturgy the themes of hurt, sorrow, repentance and amendment of life are intimately connected with the rite of Holy

Communion: “take this holy sacrament to your comfort, and make your humble confession, meekly kneeling upon your knees”.

Today, we undoubtedly live in an era of discomfort at many levels: in the realm of government and our nation’s future; in the dimension of human relationships and identity, and in the consequences of the damaging impact of the human race upon the environment.

By contrast, the beauty of this festival calls us to repentance for all the ways in which we inflict damage and discomfort on ourselves, on each other and on the earth. The Church calls her children to be re-clothed in their rightful minds through the processes of celebrating the gift of holy communion. The beauty of comfort lies in the balm of absolution that is collective in public liturgy. But let it also be a beauty of comfort that you seek through the sacrament of penance for damage done in the deep and intimate places of your lives. Here is the laboratory of love, in which the grace of God is set to work, revealing the likeness of the *Corpus Christi*, the body of Christ, in you.

And a second aspect of the theological beauty of this church is the beauty of memory and desire.

The exercise of memory in recollecting the mystery of our redemption is at the heart of all Christian prayer and devotion. This is supremely evident in the prayer of the Eucharist, proclaiming that what we are as the body of Christ is formed by obedience to the Lord’s command, “Do this in remembrance of me”.

This truth is expressed with exquisite brevity and depth by the antiphon, attributed to St Thomas Aquinas, that we heard sung for the Magnificat. How profoundly it captures the sense of the interior movement of the heart and mind, through grace, as memory stirs our desire for God.

The movement of memory and desire is intrinsic to our identity as those who are made by God with the capacity for the vision of God, which is our destiny,

and of which the exposition of the Blessed Sacrament is a fleeting, earthly foretaste. This building is a gymnasium of the Holy Spirit, where we rehearse that practice of worship, devotion and study which shapes the behaviour and attitude of the Christian disciple. This is also where the desire for the vision of God is both nurtured and renewed when it has been obscured by weariness and the trials of life.

At the end of her novel, *A Taste for Death*, P D James leaves us with the description of an elderly woman who has had her life-long faith in God severely damaged by a terrifying episode of violence and the misuse of her good nature.

When all the drama is over she goes into church and feels nothing. God is no longer there. The host in the tabernacle is simply bread; the lamp that burns before it is just a lamp. Then she remembers the words of the priest who taught her to pray and to love God. He told her that when you cannot believe any more, behave as though you did. Do the things that nurture repentance, faith and charity, and the God who gives himself to us in mystery and sacramental sign will be found, still revealing, still present, still loving.

And so Miss Wharton kneels and says the words with which she always began her daily prayers, “Lord, I am not worthy that thou shouldst come under my roof, but speak the word only, and my soul shall be healed.”

May this festival stir in you the recollection of repentance and the comfort of forgiveness, together with the beauty of memory and desire in your encounter with the living God in the incarnate Son, in the *Corpus Christi*. And so may the beauty of this Church, in all its theological depth and intensity, fortify you through the journey in time that leads to bliss and perfection in the glory of eternity that is, through grace, to be ours.