

'On the Threshold'

A Sermon preached at St John the Baptist, Tisbury on Saturday 17th September 2016

The Blessing of the restored north porch and launch of the 'Big Picture' vision

Genesis 28. 10-17. 1 Peter 2. 4-10.

'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

O come off it! (you may want to say), it's Tisbury Parish Church, for goodness' sake. St John's. Venerable, yes, and beautiful – a treasure and to be treasured, but also familiar and welcoming, part of a well-loved landmark, known to all. A friendly, as well as an imposing feature of the village landmark – but hardly the gates of St Peter!

It is a holy place, yes, made holy by the generations who have come here and sheltered here and worshipped here; and maybe been bored here (occasionally)... or challenged... or offended (even), as well as comforted and reassured – all of these, and probably much more. But *'the house of God and gate of heaven'*? Might that not be going a bit far? Is not that kind of language a bit scary, a tad presumptuous, somewhat high-fallutin'?

Are we really prepared to apply that verse from Genesis – Jacob's characterisation of the place of his dream of angels ascending and descending – to something as known and as familiarly loved as this dear, old place?

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Today we are here to bless an entrance, the north porch through which most of us passed as we came into Church this afternoon. And we do so looking ahead to further development of this building to come. So we are on a threshold in more senses than one: a threshold to a building and a threshold to a future.

Thresholds are holy. Jesus described himself as a threshold: *'I am the gate of the sheepfold'*, [John 10. 7] he said, and went on to reflect on how the way into God's presence and God's promise and hope was through him.

So we stand on a threshold – a holy place – and consider the way ahead, the development of this church. And that means not simply the development of this building, of course, for 'church' never solely or primarily means a building but, rather, the people of God. We are on a threshold to the future of this place and to the future of the people who are (in the words of our second reading) its *'living stones ... a spiritual house'* – not bricks and mortar and massive immovability but lively, volatile and expectant developers, such as I see before me now!

It's quite a strange and complex dynamic, then. We're celebrating a building – holy ground, holy walls and furnishings, an atmosphere enclosed and nurtured, history, art, tradition and inheritance – and we're doing so in the context of its development, how it will be – the same, yet different – for years and generations to come. We're on that threshold, looking forward (perhaps with excitement, perhaps with foreboding, perhaps with a bit of both), and looking back as one is bound to do when surrounded by such history and tradition as such a place represents.

But the threshold we're standing on is not just the threshold of the future, where now and yesterday meet tomorrow with all its uncertainty and possibility: it's also the very threshold of eternity, for

'this is the gate of heaven'. And that means that those who enter here – by that door we all came in a short while ago – enter and experience the very presence of God. That is quite a responsibility for the 'living stones' who animate and inhabit this place and mediate that experience.

How, then, will those coming in experience the presence of God? In beauty, in fine liturgy, in Scripture and Sacraments, in wonderful music and –who knows? – maybe even some classy preaching (!)? Well, maybe. One may hope so.

But the true assurance of encountering heaven by crossing this threshold is connection not with bricks and mortar, the glass, the wood and the stone, but with the living stones, the '*royal priesthood... chosen race... holy nation*' that the people of this place are called to be.

And that may really be the place when you want to say 'Come off it!' A chosen race, royal priesthood, holy nation – the people of Tisbury? The congregation of St John's? Can you be serious?

Yes. Yes. Yes. And yes.

That is the challenge for us as we stand on this holy ground and pray God's blessing on it which is threshold between past and future, a threshold which is also the gate of heaven, the entrance to the spiritual house made up of living stones. It is the challenge to ourselves to discover and rediscover and to grow in the characteristics of the living stones we are called to be: lively, volatile, expectant as well as welcoming, responsive, generous and outward looking.

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That, after all, is the very calling and purpose of a parish church. Part of the root of the word 'parish' is the Greek word *oikos*, which means 'house' or 'home'. This is the house – the home – not literally of God (as if God needed a place to put his feet up or shelter from the rain) but of all whom God loves and cares for and reaches out to, which is, of course, everyone.

This parish church is the place and the property, then, of all and especially perhaps of those without a home or a shelter. Some of you may remember the visitor here some years ago who for several months lived in the west porch (and some nights within the building itself) and that, which some may not have approved, was surely fulfilment of this – home for one who had none.

But metaphorically, as well as literally: the parish church is to be the house, the home, of all – of the lost as well as the found, the unbelieving quite as much as the believing, those who are in pieces easily as much as (or more than) those who have got it all sorted, for those who stay away (and always will) as much as for those who come faithfully week by week. It belongs to all and extends itself to all, the 'house' of the parish.

Earlier generations well back into the history of this place understood this: they understood that holiness and seamliness were not so much a matter of activity in this place (the services that happen here) as a function of the community of love and belonging that was brought into being here. Larger, better built, more imposing than any other building in the parish (the '*para-oikos*'), this was the home for all. For all to shelter in, to be defended in, to celebrate (even carouse) in, to take counsel (or perhaps to argue) in... and from which to be sent out renewed, refreshed and restored to engage with the world beyond and the Kingdom that is to be built there.

This is the 'home' where all belong. This is the environment where living stones – lively, volatile, expectant, and sometimes fragile – are built up into a living temple, a community of love and care and belonging, where all have a place and ownership. (Indeed, as the passage from 1 Peter also

reminded us, the most awkward and misshapen and inconvenient stone – the one the builders reject – is likely to end up as the keystone of the arch, the focal point of the entire edifice!)

That, surely, is the instinct and calling that has motivated successive Tisbury generations (at their best) to develop this church: to build it big and wide, to rebuild it when the spire fell in, to flood it with light through fine windows and adorn it richly, to provide free pews so that all could be seated, rather than just the posh and rich with their private boxes.

And it is the instinct and the calling of the living stones I see before me, who now look to the next stage of this church's service to the community of this parish. Into the future with *warmth* (heating that works!), in *comfort* (comfort breaks that do not involve a quick embarrassed trot across the car park to the Hinton Hall!) and allowing *flexibility* so that – again – a whole range of activities may flourish here, holy activities which build up the living stones and the wider community they – you – are here to reach out to and to serve.

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It all starts here! We stand on the threshold: the threshold of the future and the gateway to richer experience of God's glory and God's promise. The God whom Jacob encountered, the God of Jesus, raised from the dead and living, is and always will be the God of our ancestors and we rejoice in that. But this God is also – always, insistently and inevitably – the God of the future and of the emergent. Jesus the threshold invites us to travel in him and through him into new experience and new faithfulness: living stones, a house for all, *Parish Church* (and I mean you, here, not this) for all! Amen.