

Stewardship Sunday 1/4 – Theme: Buildings

Address by Churchwarden Zoë McMillan

I first came to St Bartholomew the Great on Christmas Day 2004, having not worshipped anywhere regularly for four years. I wasn't at all sure about coming here, but I knew I needed to go somewhere. I knew nothing about the church apart from its architectural reputation, in spite of having lived in the Barbican for fourteen years, and I remember quite clearly thinking that even if I didn't like the form of service, I could admire the architecture. I did like, and continue to like, the form of service, but that's another story.

What I want to talk about this morning/evening is our church buildings and the part they play in our worship and the life of this community. Inevitably, the major part will concern this church, because of its size and importance, but I will get to St Bartholomew the Less as well.

The Priory Church was built as an act of faith, by a sick man who was made well, and faith is at the very core of its history. Building a great church like this is a huge undertaking at any time, and never more so than in the medieval period, when calculations were a matter of experience and a good eye, and every part of the construction relied on the strength and labour of men, not machines. Quite early on its life the church began to subside, and you can see the evidence just below the north triforium. A little later the central tower collapsed, as a result of either an earthquake, or, more likely, a lightning strike. In spite of these setbacks, the building continued, and the monastic community went about its business. One might reasonably think that the Dissolution in 1539, which was a time of wholesale destruction, would have spelt the end of St Bartholomew's, but faith continued to play its part. This time the parish had the faith to buy the part of

the church in which we now sit, from the Crown, for the local community.

In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, the church would have looked rather different from the way it does now, and indeed, from the way it looked in the Norman period. Behind the altar a flat wall had been erected in place of the apse, and the Lady Chapel, both triforia and the north transept were occupied by purely secular activities. There followed a period of neglect of the building in the second half of the nineteenth century, and there was a move locally to demolish the church and build a new one. Note – build a new church, not a parade of shops or a gin palace, so faith still hung on.

Central to our Christian faith is the Resurrection, and at that crucial point in its history, St Bartholomew the Great experienced its own resurrection. Men of vision and ability came forward and in three separate building campaigns, restored this great church to as near its original form as was possible from the evidence remaining in the surviving building fabric, which was very extensive.

The story of St Bartholomew the Less is of course much less action packed, because of its relatively lesser status. Though it might be a small church, it attracted the attention of the eminent architect George Dance the Younger, who was responsible for turning the medieval chapel into the light, airy building we see today. He achieved this by first creating the octagonal shape and then topping it with a glazed clerestory rising above the old walls, which is what lets in the light. Sadly, his timber construction soon succumbed to dry rot, but in a much lesser way than at the Great, a sort of resurrection happened at the Less too. In the early nineteenth century the timber construction was replaced with stone, topped by an iron roof, all retaining the form of Dance's clerestory. The focus of this little building has always been the community of St Bartholomew's

Hospital, and now, as never before, we need to build up that relationship again. The church has been a refuge and solace for many patients and their relatives, and now has a vibrant family service every Sunday.

I firmly believe that in some way the fabric of buildings absorb the essence of the life which goes on in them. I worked at Hampton Court Palace for five years, and it was just as much a political hotbed then as it had been in the sixteenth century; the only real difference seemed to be that if an employee blotted his or her copybook, they were sacked, rather than being beheaded. When I arrived at St Bartholomew the Great, I immediately felt the power of the building, and knew that it was where I would be at home spiritually. The bulk of the construction reassures me, the serenity of the building calms me, and all-pervading is the sense of nearly 900 years of continuous worship and service. And amazingly, none of this diminishes, however often I come here. If you look at the visitors' book, you'll see that similar feelings are recorded by visitors from all over the world. This building is a very powerful aid to worship, and as stewards for those who come after us, we need to take personal responsibility for its upkeep, in terms of money, time and talents.