

Presidential Address 27th February 2016

At Bishopsgrove, in my office in Sally's and my home, interspersed with a few modern pieces, there is rather a lot of antique furniture – brown furniture as it is often and more accurately termed - and random objects that we have picked up at auctions, antique and brick-a-brac shops over the years. There are inkwells in wood, leather, glass, pewter, brass and silver, and old telephones on planked wooden tables, a Bible box, a nineteenth century print of an angelic John Wesley being mobbed by angry gruesome locals in Wednesbury, where I was born, and my pride and joy, a leather topped partners' desk in my office.

I love antiques shops, and I particularly love auction rooms. Going to an auction viewing is like travelling through time and space. Each object offers a glimpse into a different world – a sewing box containing thread and tools in their original 1930s packaging; a set of Edwardian chairs battered and lovingly repaired through decades of use; an old record player evoking the age of my grandparents; the battered leather suitcases festooned with labels from the days I can recall when luggage could be sent ahead by train. But of course, buried among the treasure, or perhaps more often than not swamping it, there is all manner of junk. There are boxes of broken pottery rescued from a skip that should properly have been left where it was. There are tables with dodgy legs that would cost more to repair than they were ever worth new. There are collections of miscellaneous objects that the auctioneer has optimistically bundled together, hoping that someone sees potential in at least one of the items. It takes a discerning eye to be able to pick out the treasure from the rubbish, to imagine the item sitting proud in your front room and seeing its true worth for good or for ill.

Without wanting to be in any way disrespectful to some of our worshipping spaces, the similarities between auction show room and church are sometimes very evident. In church we delight in our traditions, we rightly celebrate our heritage, so we hold onto old items of value – our pulpits and furnishings, our lecterns and our silver. But at the same time, we are a living church and new items are necessary. There's no point in the children's corner being filled with cherished antiques: things need to be new, current, bright, and disposable. And let's face it, antique furniture can rarely be carried and folded away quite so neatly as a go-pak table. So we quite rightly end up with this wonderful and eclectic mix of the modern and the old, the historic and the forward looking.

I say “wonderful” but of course sometimes the balance can go the wrong way. Churches, unlike antiques halls, are living, functional spaces. They are there for a purpose, which is to express our living faith and to reach out to people in our modern communities. An appropriate amount of history and tradition is useful in doing that of course – churches provide that vital link between the past and the present, the living and the dead who are all one in Jesus Christ. But if we are going to err, we need to err on the side of the living rather than the dead. Otherwise our buildings get swamped with history at the cost of the contemporary; the dead are privileged over the living.

Church pews can be a case in point. Those who know me well will have heard me hold forth before on the subject of church halls. It worries me that so many financially stretched parishes are struggling to maintain two buildings, when a skilful reordering, perhaps a decluttering, of the church building would provide a stunning and sustainable setting for both our worship and our community life. I’m not suggesting we throw out all our ancient treasures – I know how heartbroken I would be if I was told to clear my house of all the wonderful items that root me in the past and give me a sense of history. But I am saying that not all those wonderful objects we might delight in have a clear purpose in our present day churches, and some of them symbolically and literally get in the way.

Today at Synod we are reflecting on the practical application of “live: pray: serve.” Into the mix of your discussions, let me throw a challenge. How does the use of your church hall support your witness and outreach, your evangelism and mission? And where it doesn't directly, does the income you get help to maintain the bigger church building which is used for only a few hours each week? Of course you will suggest that sacred space is very important, and it is, but most of the time what is needed is a chapel or sanctuary where there are resources for prayer and bibles to read, where devotion can be made before the reserved sacrament or an icon, where peace and solace can be sought at the foot of the cross.

To what extent do your spaces invite and enable you to live, pray and serve in your local community? Have you struck the right balance between the cherished traditions, the monuments to historic faith, and the living faith of our contemporary society?