

Why is the church important to you? Not the Church with a capital C, the universal Catholic Church, I hope we all know why that is important; no, this church, St Bede's; why is this church important to you?

Clearly it is important. You are here today. Many of you have sneaked a look in while the work was in progress; or followed the developments on the web-site. Others have preferred to wait until now and feel the full force of surprise, but you have all been interested, sometimes worried; and, I hope, now reassured and well content. But why is it so important?

This building after all is only stone and mortar. If it fell apart tomorrow, burnt to the ground, it would be sad but it would not be a tragedy. A tragedy is when the young die needlessly; when a passenger aircraft falls from the sky. The destruction of this building would not be a major news story; only the local press would be much interested, but many of us would be devastated, inconsolable. It is worth asking why.

There will be many answers. I think it is worth pondering what your answer would be. I offer a few of my thoughts in answer to that question.

First of all - memory. This place is a museum of memories. We all have treasured recollections of events that have happened here – baptisms and funerals; first Holy Communions and weddings. For some people this place evokes a life-time of memories which include going to the school across the way. For some this is a place of pilgrimage to visit the revered remains of those greatly loved. And among the memories are remembrances of the priests who have conferred the sacraments, preached endless homilies, been welcomed guests in your homes, held the hand of the cherished in their final moments on this earth: the irascible Fr Herbert Hammond, the mellifluous Fr Tony Burke, the amicable Fr Gerry Harney, the cerebral Fr Michael Keenan; and the one who I shall not name who would be in the Queens Hotel by twenty past eleven having celebrated the eleven o'clock Mass.

St Bede's is one of those places, St Marie's is another, the basilicas in Assisi certainly are though the basilicas of Rome tend not to be except in quiet corners and quiet leafy cloisters, places where there is a sense of prayer; a calm; visitors feel at once that this is a holy space. It comes when the prayers of people have become embedded in the fabric of the place, in the very mortar along with the scent of incense in the fibres.

St Bede's is a place with a past. Memories have been accumulating since 1842 when Mr Badger made the gift of land for the building of the church. However valuable though, it is doubtful whether memories alone can or should preserve an institution. The church must be important to us because of what it is, not merely for what it has been.

St Bede's has been and must be a place where people meet Christ. Where they meet him in the Word proclaimed and explained; where they meet him in the Eucharist the theme of our readings in the coming five weeks; and where they meet him in other people. Faith is never something that can be practised alone. Faith is a communal exercise. We pray with each other and for one another and also engage with each other, renewing acquaintances and making new friends is a vital aspect of the life of the church. A cup of tea and the bacon buttie are important parts of the Holy Communion we celebrate here. Jesus in the Gospel fed the thousands first and then taught them in the synagogue.

When I left College in Rome I thought that I would never again experience the celebration of the liturgy with such style, quality and vibrancy. There was so much talent there directed towards worship. I have worked in only four parishes, all very different but the celebration of the liturgy has been of great dignity and power in each of them, able to lift the heart and mind to God. Whether it was with the resources of a Cathedral or nothing other than exuberant enthusiasm with unaccompanied voices, my forebodings, based on a childhood of liturgical impoverishment, have not been realised. Here in St Bede's we are capable of wonderful and moving celebrations but we are ever working on narrow margins. We need more people willing to give their time and musical skills to offer fitting worship and honour to God; and thereby bring more people, and especially young people to give praise and thanks to God in this place.

We are approaching the year of faith, announced by Pope Benedict. Renewed evangelisation is a proclaimed aim of Benedict's papacy. St Bede's always a lovely place is now stunning. The lily has been gilded. Be proud of your church. Show off your church. Bring people here: the lapsed, the disaffected, the ones who have fallen away because the habit has been lost. There are perhaps hundreds of people who have drifted away without ever rejecting the church or losing the faith. Now we have a reason for inviting them back; an opportunity to echo Jesus words, "Come and see".

Why is this church important to us? Because it is part of our lives. It is a treasure store of memories; a place of prayer and peace; another home. May it continue to be a sanctuary, a holy place for another hundred and seventy years and more.

St Bede: Pray for us.