

It is a strange feeling to be the first to arrive in church, disturbing the stillness of the air, or the last to leave, locking in the cooling, creaking pews to recover from their burden until next time. Am I being fanciful, am I deluded, to think that I can somehow discern whether a church is prayed in or not, whether the stones exude a quality of faithfulness? Maybe it's just too many years of ordained life, of regularly being the first into church or the last out. Yet I'm sure all of us can think of holy places- some churches, many not, places where the particularity of the moment, through the beauty of the natural world or the creativity of art or music, or the experience of profound human

relationships of love or trust seems to lift the gossamer thin veil between us and the divine.

Here we are in this church, celebrating its Feast of Dedication, a day set aside to give thanks to God for the faithful witness of, yes, us in amongst the story of thousands of Christians, since its consecration on 26 June 1839. And a day when we give thanks to God too, for place, for stone and brick and glass and pew- for as much as the people of God form the body of Christ in this place, so we cannot also forget that the presence of this church building is part of our mission and our ministry, faith incarnated. This church was built at a bargain-basement price for the poor of our parish, it cost less than 10% of the cost of St Luke's built some 20 years earlier- and, we should remember, it was paid for by the

Hydman Trust, the family Hydman, having made their vast wealth through sugar plantations and the slavery which wrought those profits. Like the people of God, the buildings of God also have complex and contradictory stories. Yet here we are, this is what we have, in order to proclaim the love of God to today's community of this parish. Complex, mixed, stories with which we need to wrestle. The priest and poet R. S. Thomas wrestled with church and faith all his life. He wrote a poem entitled In Church thus:

'Often I try to analyse the quality of its silences.

Is this where God hides from my searching?

I have stopped to listen, after the few people have gone, to the air, recomposing itself For vigil.

It has waited like this since the stones grouped themselves about it.

These are the hard ribs of a body that our prayers have failed To animate.

Shadows advance from their corners to take possession of places the light held For an hour.

The bats resume their business.

The uneasiness of the pews ceases.

There is no other sound in the darkness but the sound of a man Breathing, testing his faith On emptiness, nailing his questions One by one to an untenanted cross.'

Yes, this building is 'the hard ribs of a body'- the body of the faithful and the body of the building are

intertwined, week by week, high days of marriage and baptism, hard days of pain and death meet here, how could these walls, the ribs of this human community not be soaked in that human attempt to understand, to follow, to be faithful. And today the whole Church of God celebrates St Thomas the Apostle. Thomas whom we call the Doubter, as if that were something negative. Surely, It is well said that the enemy of faith is not doubt but certainty. Doubt pervades the scriptures from the beginning- Jesus himself doubts- and for Thomas his doubts serve as a spur to further discipleship, living through them, wrestling with the messiness, 'How can we know the way?' Thomas is reputed to have journeyed far and wide in his faithful witness to Christ after the resurrection- East, not West, which

is probably why we don't appreciate it, across the Jordan, to Arabia, to Persia, to India, building not churches but 'heavenly palaces'- groups of faithful disciples, following in the Way.

And Thomas- as the builder of 'heavenly palaces' is, conveniently for us today, also the patron saint of architects, whose role for us is to provide sacred space, inspiration, for faithful communities to meet and worship, to deepen our faith, serve our community, and to enable lives to be transformed.

We've just spent £90,000 on securing the East End of this church, to be waterproof for another 183 years- beautifully crafted stone work, and we'll have to spend more very soon on the West End, which is leaking through the mortar after nearly 200 years of London pollution. Yes, this building is our

gift but also our challenge, the gift to and challenge for the faithful community whose heart beats within the ribs of these walls and this roof.

Like Thomas the Apostle, to wrestle with priorities, with the faith which guides those priorities and choices, is part of who we are as the Christian community in this place- on Sundays gathered in worship, as ABC every Thursday witnessing to the love of God for children and their carers, every Tuesday and Friday for our school to gather and question, reflect on God's design for them and their worlds, for residents groups, for art for music, for people to rest and be refreshed in the gardens, for those who cross the threshold for baptism, marriage or funerals.

Thomas would have recognized this struggle, as would also our forbears over the last 183 years here. Doubt and struggle is a crucial part, the cross part, of who we are as followers of Jesus, working out our priorities.

I think we could do worse than listen again to RS Thomas, who knew that faithfulness and struggle in both his priestly and poetic vocation- he speaks for all of us as we wrestle with being the people of God in this place- with finance, with the inheritance of slavery, with the future of buildings, with the relevance of our teaching, with the shrinking of moral principle in our public sphere and ask how all this fits with faith. In his poem The Kingdom RS Thomas writes:

The Kingdom

It's a long way off but inside it There are quite
different things going on:

Festivals at which the poor man Is king and the
consumptive is Healed;

mirrors in which the blind look At themselves and
love looks at them Back;

and industry is for mending The bent bones and the
minds fractured By life.

It's a long way off, but to get There takes no time
and admission Is free, if you purge yourself Of
desire, and present yourself with Your need only
and the simple offering Of your faith, green as a
leaf.

Amen.