

Sign of Delight - Week Beginning 1st June

John Betjeman may well have been sitting on this same outdoor bench when he composed his quirky love poem, *The Licorice Fields* at Pontefract. Two of us were sipping coffee and looking around us. Everything was totally ordinary under a bright autumn sky. A grandmother, sitting with her daughter, was bottle-feeding her grandchild. They were all smiling. Next to them, at another table, a man was smoking and reading the *Racing Post*.

An ambulance passed in the distance, its siren insistent. An ice-cream van, vivid in its colour and jingle, was surrounded by clamouring kids. The shops were busy. Two teenagers were laughing as they tried to hug each other while cycling past us. An argument suddenly broke out in a passing family. Just as quickly, it died away. A drunken man was sitting against a wall, his little dog staring at him intently and anxiously. Some folk were elderly stepping carefully over the slippery autumn leaves. It was, as I have said, an ordinary street in an ordinary town full of ordinary people doing what ordinary people do – getting on with their lives as best they could.

Close by was a small church, locked, unattractive and unnoticed. We wondered why this was so. What had gone wrong? Why did it no longer attract people as it once did, or have anything to say, especially with the approach of advent, by way of joy, encouragement for the town's inhabitants? If we were asked by an interested passer-by for the story of that neglected church, we discussed two ways of responding.

One way, the usual way, would be to describe it as the necessary refuge from a threatening world; therefore we must join it, become practising members of it, believe its teachings, obey its laws, overcome our sinfulness, so as to please a Christian god out there, and thus be saved.

Our questioner might point out that obviously such a message no longer touches people: that for some reason they do not seem to hear it, or need it now. Small wonder, she might add, it looks so lost and lonely.

The other way, we would then explain, the traditionally contemplative but forgotten way, would be to perceive that very ordinary church as the symbol of the holiness of the whole town, the sign that the families and individuals in every street are already a delight to God, exactly as they are. . .

We would talk to our new and interested friend about the God who is walking along the precinct here, disguised in the laughter and loneliness of the faces, hearts, minds of all those who, in their own way, try to live their lives as fully and as decently as possible; about a church that gently keeps purifying us of our deadly attraction towards what is destructive in our lives, of the fearful blindness that Christians call original sin.

The forgotten little church, we would explain, is really about a wonderful Christian belief that sees the world as the Body of God, that sees our families and our communities as the home of the Holy Spirit. We would speak about the sacrament of conversation, the sacrament of listening, the sacrament of presence, the sacrament of the 'now'.

We would explain that this little church was really there to remind Christians that they can, by their very presence, profoundly enrich the lives of others. There is no other non-violent way to bring peace to our hearts, to our town and to a world gone astray. That is what this deserted church is for, if we but knew it. It is to celebrate every sign of human growing, flowering and authenticity, everything that unlocks our human creativity and imagination . . .

Fifty years ago, sitting on another bench, this time in the United States, monk and poet Thomas Merton, in a sudden moment of epiphany, looked around him at the teeming streets of Louisville and asked much the same question: 'Who will tell these people they are walking around, shining like the sun?' That is the glorious role of the forbidding little church we saw in Pontefract that day – to be the utter guarantee of the shining presence of an incarnate God in all the community-making that goes on in the shops, pubs and streets around it, in the northern skies above it, in the good Yorkshire ground beneath it.