

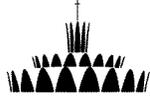
## SAINT LOUIS ABBEY



### Fr. Bede's Sermon at Evensong at Oriel Chapel, Oxford University

Vanity of vanities, all is vanity!

Well, thus spake the preacher. Though it was quite tempting to substitute readings for evensong this evening that might have been a bit more conducive to my theme, I couldn't really pass up the opportunity to hear that magnificent passage from the Book of Ecclesiastes, and decided to allow the texts given in the normal cycle of the Common Worship lectionary to serve our purpose this evening. Our friend Qoheleth, never one for false optimism, reaches a sort of crescendo of despair at the end of his text, and yet, what gives his text the unique pathos it enjoys is that deep within each of us, his words seem to ring true. So much of our lives is spent in the pursuit of achievement and accomplishment, that we are unwilling to pause to consider our final end. Really his message, however cloaked in pessimism it might seem, is to savor the moment: take time to take stock of the good things around you. If you will, seize the day. How appropriate is this message to those of us who have the great pleasure and joy to spend our days here at university. Even as we sit here this evening, I am powerfully aware that these stones have absorbed the words and prayers of the Venerable John Henry Newman and countless other souls. How rich indeed is the world around us. Earlier in the term, Dr. Jane Shaw, preaching at New College made a connection between architecture and immortality, that perhaps can be used to connect Qoheleth to the topic at hand: Speaking of the exuberant chapel that William of Wykham built for posterity at New College, she suggested that the building was a way for Wykham to achieve a certain type of immortality. Those stones would carry his memory and indeed beg prayers for his soul as long as they stand. Thus through the medium of Architecture, his memory continues among us to the present day. Here perhaps is the meaning of all those tombs and monuments which fill the Cathedrals, churches and chapels of England. They represent a sort of physical and artistic manifestation of the communion of saints, a unique form of ancestor worship, if you will, that has flourished on this Island for the last 500 years and considerably longer, though much that went before has perished. Of course in the mind of Wykham and those like Bishop Fox, who founded your neighbor Corpus Christi, or Archbishop Chichile, founder of All Souls, who built the fine chantries still to be seen in the great churches was concern for avoiding purgatory. To our modern minds, this seems



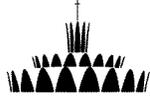
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an odd concept, but even here can we not see a striving for the resurrection, a goal that unites all Christians and a hope perhaps for those who do not share our faith. I recently came across a fine funeral monument to a proud Benedictine Prior, who could almost have come from the pages of Chaucer. Far from wringing his hands at the prospect of the fires of purgatory, Prior Nelond's tomb boldly proclaims Christian hope:

*This heap of earth covers the bones of Thomas Nelond. He was renowned for the gifts of virtue and reason, and by good example he augmented the honor of religion. To the world he was a Martha, but to Christ a Mary in his mind. In the world he thrived, but heavenly wisdom was his. On the 14th day before the kalends of May, he departed this life to take his seat at the heavenly table.*

There is always a temptation for familiarity to breed contempt, when we spend so much of our time surrounded by the wonderful buildings, the precious gift of the past to us here in the present. Church buildings, of which we here have some of the finest examples, are a testament to the Christian truth that our God is both eminent and yet always transcendent. The God who came down and was born not in a grand palace but a rude stable is a God for whom the here and now has meaning. For whom the material world has value. The great mystery of the incarnation is that history becomes a theological principal, and that in appreciating what has gone before us, we can more clearly see the working out of God's unfathomable will in the destiny of humankind. Here is the meaning of the Scriptures, as they have transmitted through the ages the will of God for his creatures; each word the symbolic transmission of the Divine. Likewise, in Christian art, we have a symbolic communication of the human soul as it receives from God the pattern of what it means to be created in God's image and likeness, and as it strives toward union with the absolute. Above all, in the cross, we have the symbolic anthropology of the human figure, and this cross, as we well know, forms the most basic form of Christian architecture, the great cruciform geometry of the medieval cathedral. In its verticality it shows man lifted up from the earth and striving for the heavens, and in its horizontality man's arms raised to praise his creator and to embrace all of creation. In the same way, our towers and spires direct our thoughts resolutely heavenward, a warning and reminder in three dimensions as clear as that of Qoheleth: "Remember your creator!"



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I believe it was Dom David Knowles, a member of my own order, who speaking of the dissolution of the monasteries said that when all has been said about the corruption of the late medieval church, the worldliness and vice of the monks, and the need for reform: “The Cross reached high to remind the world of the Savior who died for it, the bells in the towers pealed out to remind men and women of the absolute need of prayer in living the Christian life, and the great gates stood open wide to feed the destitute, a constant reminder that the poor are always with us.”

Perhaps this is part of the reason that so many people of our day find themselves drawn to our churches. Pitkin guides in hand, they retrace the steps of so many pilgrims of earlier ages to seek out the God who dwells among us. The God to whom these buildings was raised, the place where the Church continues to gather, where the Eucharist continues to be offered, and where communion with the Saint’s, our spiritual ancestors, is shared. Perhaps in our day, our day when the visual speaks more loudly than the oral, the world seeks a God who manifests himself, not in doctrine, not even in written words, but in image and symbol, in light and shade. In such a world Christian art and architecture can perhaps preach sermons more eloquently, can transmit Christian truth more concretely, and can raise the mind to God more readily than all the efforts of all of our learned doctors and modern day divines.