



St Luke's in the City

150 years - 2009

Celebrating at the Crossroads

4th Sunday after Pentecost

8 June 2008

Liturgy as Transformation

GATHERING: Transcendence & Immanence

Christ has no body on earth but yours.

Theresa of Avila

Many of us have been schooled in the 'fear of the Lord'. There is something right about this. "It is a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God," counselled the writer of the Letter to the Hebrews. The high middle ages concretised this attitude towards God in very tangible form. The medieval cathedral, and all the small cathedrals modelled on its genius ever since – including our 'Gothic Revival' St Luke's – was designed to give very real expression to the ineffability, the omnipotence and utter otherness of God. In a word, transcendence. Moses before the burning bush, Isaiah in the temple, Ezekiel confronted by visions of the flaming wheels on the heavenly throne – all were rightly terrified of the glory of the Lord. God's transcendence is concretely expressed in gothic architecture. 'High Altars' and the 'Holy of Holies' of First Temple Judaism are the product of the same intuition. In this dispensation only a select few, properly vested, may enter the Holy of Holies. Church high altars were similarly barricaded by a rail whose origins lie in the Jerusalem Temple.

It may come as a surprise to discover that early church practice and architecture was so totally different. When Jesus' followers first came together on the Lord's day, to break open the Scriptures and to share in Christ's Body and Blood, they sat around a table together. The defining experience, that which constituted the ecclesia, was a shared meal. The earliest *ecclesia* was constituted as the People of God because they were a people animated by the great breakthrough in Jesus Christ – Emmanuel, 'God with us!' Not God somewhere else, utterly unapproachable. Not God in the Holy of Holies only accessible to a religious few. Not God at the east end, at the gothic high altar behind its railed barricade. Rather, God with us. The Word became flesh and dwelt among us. In a word, immanence.

Transcendence. Immanence. The christian dispensation affirms the truth of both. God is as near to us as our breath. God remains ultimately Other. It is indeed a fearful thing to fall into the hands of the Living God. Emmanuel, God with us. The Body of Christ is the heavenly food on the Altar. 'This is the Body.' 'We are the Body.' The Body of Christ is the gathered ecclesia. Transcendence and immanence. Our liturgy endeavours to hold these two truths in creative tension. We gather around the table of the word, the lectern, and the table of the sacrament, the altar, seeing each other, looking at the living Body of Christ, the immanent Divine Presence. At the same time we look through each other to the Beyond who is in our midst. The purpose of our symbols and ritual action is to gesture towards the paradoxical Mystery – Transcendent-Presence.

Fr David Moore