

HOMILY AT THE RE-OPENING OF WORTH ABBEY CHURCH 12th JUNE 2011

By Fr Christopher Jamison OSB

Scripture has a surprising amount to say about furniture. As we heard in the reading from Exodus, the designs for Ark of the Covenant were extraordinarily detailed; God's 10 commandments given to Moses were so precious that they had to be kept in a cabinet as strong and as beautiful as the words themselves. Contrast this with the Garden of Eden where there was no furniture; in paradise, nature provided all necessary fixtures and fittings. But once humanity had been expelled from this perfect estate, fallen humanity had different needs and among the many good things God has constantly offered us to meet these needs is furniture. For example, the birth of Jesus is accompanied by a very rough piece of furniture: a manger for a bed. And let's not forget that Jesus the carpenter would have spent many years making furniture with his own hands. And the furniture theme comes alive spectacularly at the very end of the Bible. The Book of Revelation declares that there will be no temple in the New Jerusalem because the Lord God and the Lamb will themselves be the temple. While there may be no temple in the New Jerusalem there is, however, plenty of furniture: there are lamp stands and golden bowls, there is an altar and there is a throne. And the city itself has diamond walls and foundations faced with every kind of precious stone.

Why should scripture be so full of furniture? Well furniture is what gives purpose to an empty space. Take the furniture out of a room and its purpose is neutralised. Put in furniture and the space has a purpose, put in what we call purpose built furniture and the way the space is to be used becomes even clearer.

One of the most striking choices in the earliest years of the Catholic Church was in the 4th century when persecution came to an end and thousands were baptised. Christians had to design a building for the assembly of the faithful when the numbers of the baptised outgrew the house churches. As the building for the celebration of the liturgy Christians chose not the Roman temple but the Roman basilica, the large public room in which the business of the town was conducted. But this secular space had to have a new purpose built into it and so the classic Catholic tradition of Church furnishing was established. There was a stone altar for the celebration of Mass, a fixed chair from which the bishop or priest could preside and there was an

ambo from which to proclaim the scriptures. And by means of these three pieces of furniture the presence of Christ was celebrated. The Word of God was proclaimed at the ambo, the Sacrifice of Christ was offered at the altar and from the chair the priest presided and led the prayers *in persona Christi*. Even when not in use, these three items came to symbolise the presence of Christ as sacrifice, as Word and as priest. The furniture itself becomes sanctified by its use and is a permanent reminder of the purpose of the Church, a reminder not only of the purpose of the building but also of the mission of the faithful.

So today we celebrate with great joy the completion of this abbey church's furnishing. As we do so, we look back to the origins of our community and the creation of the abbey church, remembering with profound gratitude the work of the architect of the Church Francis Pollen and his partnership with Abbot Victor Farwell and the community at that time. Francis not only created one of the finest churches of that era but he also designed an altar that has marked out the purpose of the abbey church so majestically from its inception. And alongside the altar as a pair sits the beautiful baptismal font, the source of Christian life, now admirably complimented by the holy water stoops at the entrances.

But the furniture marks out not only the purpose of the Church building it also marks out the purpose of the community of the Church. The Christian life is a call to sacrificial love on the altar of life, a call to express the Word of God from the ambo of our hearts and a call to pray at our personal chair in union with Christ our High Priest. Each of us is called to have in our lives a space that is an altar where we offer love, an ambo where we speak and listen well and a priestly chair where we offer up prayer. The furniture of the soul can mark out the purpose of our lives as clearly as the furniture of the church can mark out the purpose of the building.

Yet as we look around this Abbey Church today we see other kinds of furniture beyond those core items described so far. We see choir stalls for monks and pews with kneelers for the congregation. What do these tell us? They tell us that this is a church that has a special place for monks and a special place for lay people, each now honoured with furniture built by hand specifically for them and each now with their distinctive place. Thomas and the Heatherwick Studio have achieved a remarkable design that combines form and function quite beautifully while giving modern expression to traditional forms.

In addition we have a new lighting design, a new sound system and, at last, clean concrete not forgetting new windows and skylights. With new confessionals still to come. This all adds up to a completed Abbey Church, a completion made possible by the generosity of so many benefactors. Many have contributed and we sincerely thank everybody for their donations, with special thanks to some who have made exceptional donations in order to make this project possible. We also thank Fr Aidan who as bursar has given unstintingly of his time and energy, bearing the heat of the project; our community owes him a great debt of gratitude.

This completion inevitably poses the question if and how the work of building might continue; this is now a question for the community and our advisors. Yet the completion also poses another even more demanding question: if the furnishing expresses the purpose of the abbey church and if that shapes our interior life as Christians and monks, that purpose also describes our place in the holy Catholic Church. How will we as a monastic community in collaboration with our lay partners, how will we express our sacrificial love, our preaching and our praying within the wider context of the Church and the world? We hear much of the Big Society at present; the question facing us at Worth is how will we be part of the Big Church. We need to be clear about the vocation of the Church as part of our work of clarifying our vocation as a monastery and as we encourage more individual vocations to the monastic way of life. The role of a monastery in the life of the church is unique, a sanctuary of prayer and community life through which the Gospel is proclaimed.

I'd like to conclude on a personal note. In recent months it's been my privilege to write a monthly newspaper column. I recently wrote a piece about cloisters and when I submitted it told the editor that I thought it was rather bland and dull. She said to go with it and see. To my surprise, many people contacted me to thank me for such helpful insights, lay people, religious and priests. In the article I described how the cloister was an empty space at the heart of the monastery, closed to visitors. This is a space so full of spaciousness and light that it is absolutely not a waste of space. We all need that spaciousness and light in our souls and in our communities. In time our community may decide that we need a physical cloister to sustain that dimension of our monastic life at the service of the church. So the cloister is held as a resource for the whole church not just for monks. This monastic life exists not only to create beautiful

souls but above all to build a beautiful church. And that leads us straight back to the object of today's celebration, a beautiful church.

So what better feast to celebrate the re-opening of this abbey church than Pentecost, the birthday of the church, when the dispirited disciples were given new inspiration to proclaim Christ to all peoples. As we rededicate this building, may we be filled with that same Holy Spirit. May this abbey church be an inspiration for all and a living testament to the monastic life at the service of the church and the world.