

I first set foot in this church on St Patrick's Day, 2000. The date is firmly etched in my mind. It was the day I was being interviewed for the post of Pastoral Studies Tutor at Westcott House. After a gruelling morning of 5 interviews and endless grinning I was offered the job then and there before I have even left the premises. This really came as a shock to me since having seen the quality of the other candidates, I didn't think I stood a chance and so had relaxed into the interview and said what I felt rather than what I thought they would have wanted to hear.

Flabbergasted by the offer of the job I asked the College Principal to point me towards a suitable church where I might mull this over before committing myself one way or the other. As you will have guessed by now, he recommended St Edward's. Only problem was I couldn't find it, nor could the policeman I asked in the Market and by the time I finally arrived here, Phyllis was just about to lock up after the lunch time opening. But Phyllis, being Phyllis, took on look at me and with compassion in her eyes said that she was in no hurry and that I was very welcome to come in. And ever since that day I have known that St Edward's is a church where people think twice before closing their doors on the outside world and on all who come here.

I don't know about you, but my experience of life has left me with a deep ambiguity about Church – not about God – but about Church. I have grown used to finding church doors securely bolted from the inside against people like me

- who love the questions which lie at the heart of religion but questions the answers which are often proffered

- who conscientiously object to the no-go areas of divinely authorised exclusion zones which separate the saved from the damned

- and who resist the hi-jacking of the Gospel Good News by any one dominant group which tries to tame the messyness and the grace of everyday life.

To be honest, as I look back, the people in Church who have been salt of the earth and light of the world have not been those whose lives have been easy but rather those who have had to struggle, who have been to hell and back and found the words of Jesus on their lips: 'My God, my God, why have you abandoned me?'

In them I have found deep wells of compassion, of gentleness and the ability to reach out to others. Such people don't just happen – they emerge like Lazarus from tombs of deep darkness and, with the help of those who stand by them, shake off the bandages which constrict their freedom and turn their faces once again towards the light. I have met several Lazaruses at St Edward's – people who have felt quite dead inside but found new breath and spirit here.

Nor has new life only been on an intra-personal level. Tucked away between the Arts Theatre and the Market Square, between Kings Parade and the Guild Hall, this quirky little church with its flexible door policy keeps alive a deep memory of a God who has pitched his tent firmly in the worlds of Culture, Commerce, Study and Politics.

Rooted in centuries of Tradition, St Edward's bears witness not only to the English Reformation but also to the call to an ongoing re-forming of a Church on the brink of dis-membering rather than re-remembering its unity in the Body of Christ.

This is a place for searchers and seekers, for the spiritually restless and not just the religiously satisfied. A place of welcome where you don't have to sign on the dotted line; where people can enter as tourist, leave as worshippers or simply peep through the glass door; where the circle of peace widens each week and in which all find a place.

For many of us, this is a place where we can claim asylum from the clamouring voices and banality of contemporary life; where the older wisdom of silence and symbol, of ritual and ceremony and not only words is trusted.

But more than anything else, this is a place where people gather to roll stones away from the tombs which would starve us of oxygen, where people are helped down from the cross rather than given more powerful hammers and stronger nails with which to crucify each other..

And at a time when many in the Churches would bolt the door more firmly against us, this is a place where people of differing lifestyles and church backgrounds can tell the truth about their lives, hear the saving stories of redeeming love, find their hearts – if not burning – at least defrosting within them and know themselves included in the breaking of the bread.

I owe a great deal to Phylis and Elizabeth, to Peter, Marcus and Fraser for keeping that door open to me but also to each one of you.

Thank you

- for helping me peel off the fig leaves behind which I hid rather than accrue more of them
- for encouraging me to sing the Lord's song in a strange land
- for leaving the door open when the Church had shut it so firmly in my face
- for injecting hope, when it seemed eclipsed by despair
- for widening the horizons of my imagination when ecclesial vision seemed so narrow

but above all, for being companions – those with whom I have broken bread – on this extraordinary journey of God's extravagant love.

As we gather around this table today, to celebrate our freedom and our membership in Christ, join me in giving thanks to God who is able to do infinitely more than we can ever hope, dream or even imagine. Glory be to him in the Church and in Christ Jesus for ever and ever.

Amen.