

## Homily for the 50<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of Dedication of Church

Each church building lives with a major tension.  
It is a house of God, a place to encounter God,  
even though God cannot be contained in the universe.  
This Jacob's discovery:  
"Surely the Lord is in this place and I did not know it."

**Readings:**  
Genesis 28.11-18  
1 Cor 3.9-13, 16-17  
John 4.19-24

In the biblical story,  
Jacob has just stolen his brother Esau's birthright  
and he is on the run.  
Exhausted, he lies down in a barren, rocky place.  
As the night sky begins to take shape,  
he has a dream that changes him  
from a person who is unaware of God in any meaningful way  
to someone who suddenly knows that God is with him.  
"Surely the Lord is in this place,  
and I did not know it."

We may well experience the presence of God in many different ways.  
In our contemporary Church  
one of the great awarenesses is the presence of Christ  
in the gathered assembly, the Body.  
I was in another great church last weekend,  
the Cathedral of Saint Mary in Salisbury, England.  
Constructed in a mere thirty eight years, from 1220-1258,  
this church is designed for processions, being 440 feet from one end to the other.  
An early English Gothic design  
it has a capacity of 2500 people, mostly along that horizontal axis.

While this church has a lower seating capacity,  
what a difference form makes in our experience of the space  
and each other's presence.  
By Breuer taking that classical, long narrow form  
and widening it out to a trapezoid,  
we are all visually closer together.  
And there is not a single support post blocking a sight line.  
This is what modern building materials and design allow for;  
it gives us a stronger sense of ourselves as a gathered community.  
To be fair, the cathedral in Salisbury recently celebrated its 750<sup>th</sup> anniversary.  
It remains to be seen how durable this structure is,  
in the face of the expansion and contraction from the Minnesota climate!

I am filled with a debt of gratitude  
that should not go unexpressed:  
to Abbot Baldwin and this monastic community of 55 or so years ago  
for thinking boldly and energetically about the future:  
to Marcel Breuer, Ham Smith, Val Michelson  
and the committee of twelve for staying together thru the design process:  
to the McGough Construction company and its leadership,

the monks who tied most of the steel, cleaned countless forms,  
dug the foundations, and cut the glass for the window;  
especially the carpenters who created all the form work with such skill –  
they had to build the first church out of wood --  
and concrete workers who had to muscle the concrete  
in a uniform manner around the steel;  
to all the donors who contributed to make it possible to start;  
to all those who have prayed in this church over the past fifty years.

One of this church's strength's, both in 1961 and now,  
is what Frank Kacmarcik called its visual silence.

The altar is the focus and there are few curiosities  
that will hold one's gaze away from it for long.

The altar is not merely one attraction among many others –  
it is the attraction.

This sense of silence has its roots all the way back in the Egyptian desert  
and is a profound monastic sensibility.

It is this visual silence that supports a rhythm of sound and silence,  
of speaking, listening, and singing.

One way to think about “worshipping in Spirit and truth”  
is the possibility of our awareness

that the Spirit has to do the work of transformation

and there has to be space in our worship for our receptivity to that Spirit.

The monastic commitment to silence comes from this fundamental awareness.

Truly the Spirit is in this place and we are in silence and awe.

This visual silence once again reminds us that  
the Church is always first and foremost about  
the human Body of Christ and its participation  
in the saving work of Jesus Christ.

Abbot John Klassen, OSB

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