

# The Temple of His Presence

Peter Doll

THE GOTHIC REVIVAL continues to have a profound impact on our expectations of the appearance of a church. In 2000, the Ecclesiological Society's conference of a few years earlier led to the publication of a volume on the Cambridge Camden Society entitled '*A Church as it Should Be*', which reflected how far that Society's ecclesiological assumptions have shaped the definition for many churchgoers – and, probably, for even more no-longer-churchgoers – of what a church should look like.<sup>1</sup> A church of which I was until recently vicar, St Michael and All Angels, Abingdon, was a typical example of such a building. It is set alongside an attractive Victorian park; its design (cruciform, with nave, transepts, and chancel distinguished by a dwarf screen) came from the office of Sir G. G. Scott, and it was built between 1864–7.

The late Nigel Yates pointed out in his penultimate book, *Liturgical Space*,<sup>2</sup> that although the early Camdenians had railed against the prevalence of pews filling church interiors, by the 1870s churches were being built in which the rules of ecclesiology in relation to the position of font, altar, and pulpit were strictly applied, but which were themselves crammed full of pews. St Michael's was one such church. Some pews had been removed over the years (from the crossing and from the area in the southwest corner to which the font had been moved) but by and large the church retained its Victorian, intensively seated appearance (Fig. 1). Not only could the seating accommodate

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*Fig. 1: St Michael and All Angels, Abingdon, before the recent changes.  
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numbers far in excess of our usual Sunday congregation (around 70), it also effectively constrained the shape of our worship and other potential uses of the building.

### *The processional form of the church*

One reason the Camdenians railed against pews was that they effectively choked the symbolic expressiveness of the building. Each Gothic church was built as a microcosm, a universe in miniature, bringing together earth (in the nave) and heaven (in the chancel), each distinguished but also joined by the rood and its screen. The sacrifice of the cross unites earth and heaven and shows God's people the way from one to the other. Further, the entire Christian life is encompassed by the building and by the eucharistic liturgy which the church is designed to show forth: from the font by the entrance, to the liturgy of the word in the nave (exemplified by the pulpit) and then through the screen to the heavenly banquet of the Eucharist at the altar in the chancel.

The pew-crammed interior imposes a largely static setting for what was originally a mobile, processional journey from earth to heaven. Unfortunately, reorderings of older churches since Vatican II and even new church designs have continued to assume a static congregation, preferring to bring the altar to the people, rather than the people to the altar.

The processional form of the Gothic church did not, of course, arise out of a vacuum. Most of our premodern churches are modelled ultimately on the Temple of Solomon. As in the Temple, our historic and historically-informed churches shape our pilgrim journey with a sequence of focuses pointing to the way God covenants with us. The font at the entrance to church (like the Temple's great bronze basin known as 'the Sea') speaks of his prevenient grace meeting us on our way to cleanse us. The nave ('the Holy Place'), with its focus the lectern/pulpit/ambo, symbolises the earthly created order, the fitting place for the liturgy of the Word of God made flesh. The rood screen, like the Veil of the Temple, is the liminal sign of our citizenship in both earth and heaven, paradoxically uniting the discrete spaces of chancel and nave while asserting the integrity of each. The chancel stands as the Holy of Holies, where the worship of earth is united with that of heaven, the altar being the place where the one eternal sacrifice of Christ's self-offering to the Father is re-presented on earth.

### *Worship at St Michael's*

The community at St Michael's developed an approach to worship with the intention of working with the symbolic richness of the building rather than being constrained by the pews. We

tried to make the hallmark of our liturgy common prayer expressed through common actions and common foci: rather than the congregation being mostly passive spectators at a ritual performed by the clergy on their behalf, we wanted the whole community to be consciously celebrating the liturgy together. Thus the defining action of ‘The Gathering’ is the congregational procession to the baptismery at the door of the church; its defining focus is the font. (This focus is further expressed by the sprinkling of the congregation with blessed water from the font as a sign that our penitence and God’s forgiveness are a renewal of our baptismal covenant.) The common action of the Liturgy of the Word is the gathering back in the nave, and the common focus is the lectern/pulpit. Here the clergy seating is on a level with the rest of the congregation: in the words of liturgical historian Robert Taft, ‘All are on an equal footing before the Word of God, all are in need of its purifying effect before approaching the Eucharistic table’.

The defining action of Liturgy of the Eucharist is the congregational movement into the chancel, and the common focus is the altar. By inhabiting together the chancel space, the ‘heavenly’ place in the gothic church, we express our unity with the angels and the saints in the feast of the kingdom. There is one further common focus – on the eschaton or second coming of Christ, expressed by all facing East together. For the priest to go around the altar to face the people would effectively close the circle and declare the journey at an end. To face East together is to acknowledge that the completion of the pilgrimage is in God’s future and is dependent on Christ’s coming in glory.

After making the stational liturgy a regular part of our worship for several years, doing our best to work around the constraints of the pews, our architect told us that the joists under the wooden sections of our floor were unsound and needed replacing. Since all the pews would need to come up with the floor and many of them were worm-eaten and structurally unsound, the church council took the decision to replace the pews with moveable wooden chairs. Not only would this change enable us to use the church flexibly in our worship, it would also allow us to offer the nave of the church for use as a community space – a lunch club for the elderly; toddlers’, children’s and youth groups; concerts; a meeting space for local groups. Although some members of the congregation expressed disquiet over the use of the church for secular activities, most felt that the mediaeval example of using church naves as community centres (see, e.g. Sir Roy Strong, *A Little History of the English Country Church*)<sup>3</sup> was a precedent worth emulating. Theologically it was felt inappropriate to suggest that God was interested only in our

prayers and not in the rest of our lives; it was argued that a powerful statement of incarnational faith could be made by bringing the everyday life of our community into close contact with the sacred liturgical space.

In addition we sought to use the opportunity presented by the removal of the pews to articulate more carefully and even expand the symbolic reference of the building. Before the reordering, the tabernacle for the Blessed Sacrament was kept on a shelf on the wall to the right of the high altar. This was an unworthy and undignified provision. The tabernacle has now been placed on a stone plinth on a small wooden platform (both of these original to the building and recovered and 'recycled' from other uses) under the centre of the north transept window. The equivalent space in the south transept now has a servery where refreshments are provided after the liturgy.

The expansion of symbolic reference came with the installation of the 24-foot diameter labyrinth, inspired by examples in Chartres and other cathedrals (Figs. 2 & 3). Originally, we envisaged that it would be used primarily as means

*Fig. 2: St Michael's after the introduction of chairs in the nave, and the creation of the labyrinth at the west end. The processional form of the church, from font, to pulpit, to altar is evident. The cleared spaced in the transepts can just be glimpsed, that in the north for the Blessed Sacrament, that in the south for refreshments.*





Fig. 3: When appropriate, the chairs can be arranged choir-wise.

of spiritual exploration and prayer by individuals and groups (as indeed it has been) and as a sign of Christian life as a pilgrimage. A fuller appreciation of the mediaeval understanding of the labyrinth has helped us appreciate its deeper symbolic significance. The imagery and texts associated with the mediaeval French and Italian labyrinths consistently referred to Theseus and the Minotaur, because Theseus was seen as a precursor of Christ, the strong man who descended into the depths of hell, fought and conquered Satan, and emerged victorious leading those who had been imprisoned by sin and death (1 Peter iii. 18–21). This theology of dying, descending, and rising again is also expressed in the sacrament of baptism (Romans vi. 3–4), so the close conjunction of the two has become an apt expression of the living out of the gift of baptism in the life of the church. Happily, we were able to find a labyrinth design that not only reflected this tradition but also had an impeccable local pedigree – in an early eleventh-century manuscript from Abingdon Abbey of Boethius *De consolazione philosophiæ*. When the nave seating is arranged choir-wise (Fig. 4), the labyrinth with a legilium at the centre also becomes an effective focus of the liturgy of the Word.

### *‘A church as it should be’*

The removal of the pews gave the community at St Michael’s the opportunity to engage more deeply with the sacred geography of their church building, to deepen their experience of worship, and to transform themselves in Christ for ministry and mission to the community. It is no exaggeration to say that St Michael’s has been literally and metaphorically ‘set free’ to renew its life. It has



Fig. 4: Coffee after the service, the labyrinth in use.

deepened the community's identity as a pilgrim people, as the Body of Christ through baptism, and as a priestly people called to serve God in all his people. This setting free is true not simply for the congregation – I think it is true also for Scott's building. The old pews had tyrannised and choked and darkened the space, masking the graceful proportions and details and the processional rhythm of the nave piers, all now revealed in the renewed space. We believe St Michael's is in every sense 'a church as it should be' for the twenty-first century.

**Notes**

- 1 Christopher Webster and John Elliott (eds.), *'A Church as it Should Be': The Cambridge Camden Society and its Influence*, Stamford, 2000.
- 2 Nigel Yates, *Liturgical Space: Christian Worship and Church Buildings in Western Europe 1500–2000*, Aldershot, 2008, 121–2.
- 3 Roy Strong, *A Little History of the English Country Church*, 2007.