

## Sermon for the Architects' Company...

In all my dealings with architects, I have been taught to be cautious. One of the first grand treats Lynne and I were offered when we arrived in the City was to go to a lecture – by invitation only, gosh! – by Richard Rogers at the Lloyds Building which he had designed. I went as a country bumpkin fresh into the great metropolis and eager to be apprised of the subtle arts of the higher architecture.

The great man stood in front of his distinguished captive guests and, flicking over an easel of photographs with a desultory gesture like a tired man looking at flies, talked incoherently for twenty minutes. I have partially understood the English language since I was about two years old, but I barely comprehended a word. Then it was announced there would be questions. But questioners were dismissed, their questions ignored, as Rogers merely kept up his earlier monologue which was chiefly – no, solely – about himself and how his buildings were superior over all buildings.

We were then given a tour of the Lloyds building - that structure with its innards on the outside. Here I did gain some understanding. The main office including the ceiling was almost entirely in black – so this offered some insight into the sad phenomenon of the high incidence of suicide among City workers. There was a movement in 20<sup>th</sup> century architecture which sought first to shock and then to draw attention to the architects themselves – to turn them into the equivalent of rock stars and celebs. One thinks of Le Corbusier and his machines for people to live in – though his gang usually preferred something high renaissance in the South of France. Corbusier who wanted to pull down Paris in the interests, as he put it, of “hygiene”.

One has nightmares featuring the Bauhaus or the Leninist ideas of the Russian Constructivists. We do not actually have to travel so far when we have the Barbican on our doorstep. I remember saying last summer to a Russian friend that it resembled the Lubyanka prison. And he reprimanded me saying, “The Lubyanka is a masterpiece compared with the Barbican”. One recoils before the works and worse, the architectural philosophy, of Mies and Fry, Loos and Giedion. But God is good. By the 1970s there was a backlash and it became possible once again to praise Belcher and Lutyens. The plan of Peter Palumbo was rejected. This was the scheme to destroy the beautiful Victorian buildings at the bottom of Poultry, to abolish the medieval street plan and to construct a hideous square of windswept concrete. Though Number 1 went ahead. We thank God for small mercies. And architecture has largely recovered from its brutalist nightmare and again we see around us structures of great beauty, with the character to inspire.

Compare the superstar pretensions of some modern architects with the anonymity of the men who built the cathedrals – knowing usually that they would not even live to see their work finished. Remember the first essential of architecture – as of all arts and skills – that first of all it is a craft and a trade. And there is nothing lowly or shaming about that. The great composers were proud to be thought craftsmen. The great Johann Sebastian Bach saw himself as a journeyman, turning out a cantata every week for use in the church on Sunday. A craftsman knows his materials. A craftsman is hands on. He handles his craft lovingly. His motives are heartfelt. In the same way, I am proud to be a priest – with my priestcraft.

The Greeks knew that the purpose of architecture is the public good. Buildings and the spaces between them and town squares were designed with the vocation of the *res publica* in mind. In an age when politics had meaning, public space was sacred space. Streets and squares were supposed to reveal the character and soul of the people. What do our public spaces say about our character, our soul? The word “soulless” actually has tangible meaning in some of these places. Goethe said, “Architecture is frozen music” And when you look at the great European buildings of his day, you see an incarnation of the classical and baroque proportions of Bach and Mozart. What music do we see frozen in the buildings of our public realm? Is too much of it still heavy metal?

The architect has his own purpose and vocation and it is to design for the pleasure of man and the glory of God. If he forgets the pleasure of man, he will not glorify God who made man in his own image. If he forgets the glory of God, he will give us an inferior vision of human nature. The cathedral builders knew this and so they built with their feet on the ground and their eyes uplifted to heaven.

In some quarters God himself is called the Great Architect. And so he is. But he is the true architect. He is not the detached operator who builds merely mechanically. He is not the Designer imagined by the philosophers of the Enlightenment – a God who made the world and then left it to its own devices. God puts himself into his creation and the creation bears his imprint. More, he enters his own creation as a man in Jesus Christ. Our God is not the sort of God who might design a square mile of concrete blocks in the middle of Birmingham and then take himself off to live in Provence.

Our universe is not a machine but a house fit for Christ to live in. And he did actually live in it. That is why our first movement – as architects, as priest and people, as Christian men and women – must always be towards reverence. There are, after all, such things as holy things, and among them, one hopes and prays, holy buildings.