IT'S ONLY A BUILDING!

Posted on October 27, 2011 by Eddie

Category: Observations

Am I the only one who finds it ironic that a cathedral dedicated to St Paul, probably the most famous maker of tents in history, has been closed because of a bunch of people camping at its front door?

I don't want to get into the rights and wrongs of the protests at the Cathedral and the resignation of the canon-chancellor. The BBC and others have given this a massive amount of coverage over the past week or so and there is no need for me to add to it. What I want to do is to reflect briefly on the role of buildings in the life of the Church.

- **Buildings Have Needs**. When you have a building, you have to look after it. If you don't, then it starts to look tatty and eventually bits start to fall off. Bulbs need changing, toilets need cleaning and roofs need constant attention or they will start leaking. Public buildings have a whole bigger set of issues, they need regular fire system tests, electrical safety assessments and a whole raft of health and safety and public liability paperwork. If you are going to have a building, then you can't avoid a lot of contingent responsibilities.
- **Buildings Create Momentum**. Not only do buildings have needs, their needs multiply. It costs a lot of money to run St Paul's Cathedral and one of the traditional ways of addressing this is to open a gift shop. The problem is, that when the cathedral closes for one reason or another, the gift shop stops making money, but you still have to pay the bills. The need to keep the building going creates a need to keep a gift shop going, and so it goes on. Sadly, buildings can create so much momentum that the Church can easily lose sight of its mission in this world. How much time is given over to talking about renovations and building repairs, rather than mission to the world?
- **Buildings Aren't the Point**. Buildings are useful to the Church and they are very convenient, but we don't actually need them. When they start to take precedence in our thinking and our actions we need to either change our focus or get rid of the buildings. St Paul's is a magnificent building, one of the finest I have visited (Durham Cathedral is the finest), but it is only a building, it is not the church.

This is true of any building Christians use; a might cathedral, tin roofed chapel on a housing estate or a mission headquarters. Buildings are there to serve our mission, not the other way round!

As Christians our mission is centripetal, we are to be pushed out into the world to bear witness to Jesus, bringing people to our buildings could be part of this, but it is only a part. Our job is to get out there. Perhaps the best thing about the whole scenario at St Paul's is the way that a bunch of people have got together to hold services outside the Cathedral, among the campers. However, if they want to be really radical and missional, I'd suggest that they should carry on holding their services outside of the Cathedral even after the doors open again!

The contrast between the campers, drawn together to protest against something they consider unjust, and the solidity of the Cathedral is an interesting one. I reckon that if St Paul were to return now, he would recognise the campers. He might not agree with their message (or not all of it at

least) and he'd certainly want to speak more about a crucified carpenter than they do, but he'd certainly understand the call to be a nomad in order to witness to something you consider to be of world changing importance. I dunno what he'd make of a Cathedral though!