

What hymn would you choose for the dedication of a new church? The answer to that question depends on where you are, what your circumstances are, what the cultural and political and geopolitical context is. Four years ago I had the privilege of sitting in a room used by Christians of the first century, sited right next to a temple of Mithras in the part of Rome which burned during Nero's time and for which fire he blamed and persecuted those same believers. For them the establishment of a place set aside for prayer and worship was an act of radical opposition to the prevailing culture: the hymns would have to speak of confidence in the future, but an uncertain present.

That would also be the case for the earliest believers on this site. John, as Bishop of Hexham, then York, lived in uncertain times. Buildings had to be temporary to start with, and even the stone buildings were being destroyed and raised up. An early monastery, hidden away so that there might be physical security as well as peace, found itself under Viking attack a hundred years later. The hymns of the early builders would be of longing for the safety of heaven in difficult times on earth. Remember that the Minster's re-foundation is traditionally associated with a war, and a King praying for victory.

Think of an earlier context. In the fourth and fifth century Roman Empire, Christianity was made both made legal and attractive to the powerful, churches became both more visible and more glorious. In times of persecution a church building was to be a tent which could easily be rolled up and moved on, but always pointing to a vision of heaven. In times of stability the building itself could be aligned with that vision of heaven and the place where we see God face to face. It is for this situation, I think, that a latin writer of the sixth or seventh century wrote *Urbs beata Jerusalem*, sung today as our anthem – *Blessed City, Heavenly Salem*.

You may know the hymn: it appears in two forms in the hymn books, because when a new church was dedicated a hymn was sung both morning and evening: the other half of *Blessed City* is *Christ is made the sure foundation*. It works in places like this: we sit in what is meant to lift us to heaven, to prefigure the new Jerusalem which is a vision of 'peace and love', with gates of pearl, polished stones, sculpted statues all reflecting the design of by the heavenly architect. With big tunes, glorious music and many processions the whole effect was to establish that Christians have the hope of glory, and that the church on earth has the legitimacy and the power of the hope manifested on earth.

Edward Bairstow wrote his music to these words not for the Dedication of a church, nor for a great cathedral, but for a church festival in Heaton, Bradford. Some decades later I was a chorister in one of those parish choirs. It was the first anthem he wrote having become Master of the Music at York Minster, and his move from Leeds Parish Church, and it is rather nice myself to have come from Heaton to York. The combination of Bairstow's music with the setting of a church like this, or York Minster, or indeed Leeds Parish Church, standing proudly as it does in the heart of a great city, reinforces the glory of the vision, and Bairstow has the advantage of tying it in with musical tradition too: the themes are from the ancient plainsong for these words. There is glory and solidity here.

But if you were building a new church on a new housing estate in a northern European town now, what would you sing? Would it be this triumphal? Or, with the church in retreat, established but not confident, and with manifest internal problems, what would you sing? In a nation where a Judge has just ruled that prayers at a council meeting are not lawful, wouldn't you have more in common with John, under attack by pagan tribes and hostile nations, or even those and those Neronian Christians? And that's where the words begin to bite. For whether the church lives in times where to be the Pope was to have influence over most of the known world, or whether the Pope was seen to be a threat to the Emperor and persecuted and assassinated, Christians have always had the hope of heaven. The Heavenly Jerusalem beckons whether we are attacked or applauded.

The vision of the church as being built from living stones is true whether we meet in secret or in a building such as this. Wherever the church meets, in splendour or in hiding, what we are about is the revelation of our future hope, and being the presence on earth of the signs of the kingdom. We would do well not to assume that the church's success is always manifested in places like this: perhaps the living stones are at their polished best in the form of the community I once encountered, also in Rome, who feed 1500 people a night on the streets, or the Estonian Christians who look after the orphaned children of the Russian minority who only a decade before were there persecutors and occupied their buildings, or the Christians in the Arab spring surrounding faithful Muslims at their prayers and protecting them from attack by the authorities.

So whether glorious or humble, the Christian's prayer is the same: come to this Temple – this whose carved stones are reflections of the living stones, and bless us always, that one day we will all share the vision of the blessed city. Amen.