

A few words from the Vicar

My holiday is a distant memory now. Norway and Iceland certainly have the 'wow' factor as, to a certain extent, does Dublin (our final stop). The fjords, the waterfalls, the hot springs and volcanic mud pools are all reminders of God's wonderful creation, reminders of His majesty. Visiting these places brought on a profound sense of awe. Despite the crowds, for me, these are what the Celtic Christians called 'thin places', places where it is easy to feel a sense of God's presence.

I didn't take in the news much. Every few days I checked the internet via my mobile phone. So, whilst enjoying a warm, sunny day in Ísafjörður (which means 'Ice Fjord' in Icelandic), I read about the torrential rain back home. And, yes, I admit to being impressed as I read on Facebook about 'Village Day' being a success despite the heavy rain. Well done everyone!

However, I struggled to make sense about another piece of news I came across. I learnt that a helter-skelter had been erected inside one of our great cathedrals and a crazy golf course had been laid out at another.

I don't have a problem engaging in imaginative initiatives to spread the Gospel. I'm all for catching people's imagination to make our church buildings a little more relevant to those who would otherwise never give a thought to the faith that sustains us. So, usually, my instinct in these things is to be supportive and wonder whether we might do something similar here.

Nonetheless, I felt uneasy about these two developments, yet couldn't put my finger on the reason for my discomfort. Something seemed wrong. Well, having thought about this for a while, my unease comes down to this.

This might sound old-fashioned to some, but our churches and cathedrals are places of prayer and worship. They too are thin places.

When we open our buildings to others, we are not inviting them to enjoy all the fun of the fair, we are not attempting to replicate the English seaside experience of years gone by. There are plenty of other places where people can go to enjoy those things. Rather, we offer something that is unique. We invite them into a place of mystery, a place of marvel, a place where we (and countless generations before us) come to encounter God and the loving mercy of Christ.

As both Moses and Isaiah found, encountering God is life changing (Exodus 3 and Isaiah 6). When St Peter began to grasp who Jesus was, he fell to his knees in appreciation of the depth of his sin. When St Paul encountered the risen Christ, his heart was reconfigured.

What is on offer to us from God through Jesus Christ is no less life changing. When we invite others to join us in our sacred spaces, we hope they too will encounter God for themselves. For, if we are willing to make ourselves vulnerable to an encounter with the living God, these buildings will speak to our minds and souls at so many levels.

Indeed, our great cathedrals were built deliberately to convey the awe, majesty and, yes, the sheer danger of God. Yet, at the same time, to offer the safety, the healing, the forgiveness and the mercy of Christ.

So, I can't help thinking that gimmicks, such as helter-skelters and crazy golf courses, are a distraction from all of this.

Every Blessing

Dave