

## **Talk for Witney Civic Service, 10 September 2023 – Nick Wright**

We are here today to celebrate – among other things – the consecration of this beautiful new nave altar. It will provide the focus of worship for years to come, but its arrival opens just the latest of many chapters in the life of the church. I thought it might be worthwhile to look briefly at how it fits into the long story of altars, and worship, at St Mary's.

It is most likely that Witney church first came into existence in the 11<sup>th</sup> century – perhaps quite soon after the Norman Conquest of 1066. That first church was a relatively small building, dimly lit by small windows high up in its walls. It would have had a small, short chancel, where the crossing now is. Its altar – a stone slab, containing a relic of a saint, and inscribed with the five crosses that can also be found on our new altar – would have been placed away from the east wall, much closer to the congregation in the nave than the High Altar is today. Worshippers would have been quite close to the action, as it were, though separated from it by the chancel arch, which narrowed their view. The celebration of Mass in the Norman church would have been quite an intimate experience.

A century or so after that first church was built, a north aisle and porch was added: we still enter the church through that late-12<sup>th</sup> century porch today. But over the course of the following 50 or 60 years the church would be much more radically transformed.

At this time in history many came to believe that in the Mass the priest literally changed bread and wine into the body and blood of Christ. This physical presence of Christ in the consecrated bread and wine became the doctrine of the church in 1215, and during the 13<sup>th</sup> century there was much activity aimed at increasing the sanctity of the miracle, and its setting. Chancels were made larger, and deliberately more separate from the rest of the building. High altars – now positioned hard against the east wall and raised on steps – came to be located much further from the congregation in the nave.

Witney was no exception, being extensively rebuilt in the first part of the century. A much longer chancel was built, beyond a new central crossing: a design that transformed the floor plan of the building itself into a symbol of Christ's suffering on the cross.

The separation of congregation from clergy in the chancel would have been completed by the erection of a screen between the two. The Mass was celebrated by the priest at the High Altar, at farthest extremity of the church, with his back to the congregation. The words that he uttered were in Latin, and not intended to be clearly heard. The Mass's climax – the elevation of the host and chalice – was a moment glimpsed in the distance, and announced to those inside and outside the church by the ringing of the sacring bell.

The redeeming power of the Mass made it an attractive spiritual investment. In the later Middle Ages individuals and guilds founded what were known as chantries, to say Masses for their souls after death, thus shortening (so it was believed) the time that those souls would spend in purgatory before entering heaven. The growth of the chantry required more altars at which Mass could be celebrated, and in Witney the need to accommodate these quickly came to be reflected in the building itself. The transepts – built in the 13<sup>th</sup> century, and extended in the 14<sup>th</sup> – gave valuable east-facing wall space for additional altars. Chapels were also attached to the building: the present vestry was built as a chantry chapel in the 14<sup>th</sup> century: another large chapel was built at around the same time on the east side of the south transept, and at the north end of the north transept a chantry chapel was built, above a charnel house. By the end of the 15<sup>th</sup> century the church may have had ten or more altars.

The Reformation, which began in England in the 1530s, changed everything. Chantries were abolished and their chapels demolished, or reused: the chapel attached to the south transept of this church was sold as a house. The stone high altar would have been removed and replaced with a portable wooden communion table, which lived in the chancel, but was carried to the nave for the celebration of Holy Communion. The priest would have stood behind the table, facing the congregation, speaking in English.

The wider church building was transformed in character, as wall paintings were whitewashed over, and stained glass removed from windows, creating a lighter, brighter – but relatively austere – space.

The church of the 18<sup>th</sup> century – and especially the later 18<sup>th</sup> century – was dedicated to the Word of God, and the focus of church services shifted decisively from altar to pulpit. Large pulpits were erected, amid new enclosed box pews, and galleries were erected in the nave, bringing the congregation as close as possible to the preacher. In 1797 Witney's large Georgian triple-decker pulpit was moved to the north-east corner of the crossing, obscuring the view of the chancel for many members of the congregation whose box-pew seat had not already placed their back to the altar.

This arrangement was a far cry from the pre-Reformation church, and is quite difficult to imagine now ... thanks to the efforts of the Victorians to do away with it all.

In the words of Revd Francis Cunningham, the Rector who commissioned the work, George Edmund Street's 1860s restoration set out to 'gut the church from end to end'. Almost everything that had been brought into the church since the Reformation was removed, along with some elements introduced in the later Middle Ages. These included the 15<sup>th</sup> century east window, taken out as it disrupted the purity of the early Gothic architecture that Street revered.

At the heart of the 'restoration' was the chancel, rebuilt beneath a new roof, with its floor raised above the level of the nave, and high altar several steps above that. Behind the altar was a sculpted reredos, in the Medieval style, and to its right a restored 'sedilia' for the clergy to sit in. Though made rather gloomy by the chancel's narrow windows of Victorian glass, the high altar was, once again, most decisively the focal point of the building.

Though Street's reordering was in the context of a widespread movement that sought to revive traditional worship, it was not uncontroversial. Older Witney worshippers would barely have recognised their church, physically or liturgically.

Today, the high altar is deemed too distant from the congregation to be used regularly, and for some time worship has centred on a nave altar. But that altar was hardly fit for the importance of its purpose. Now, we celebrate its replacement, which reflects in some way nearly all of its predecessors, combining symbolism of the medieval altar with the portability

of the Elizabethan communion table. And in a way, with this change – just the latest in nearly a thousand years of constant change – we have come full circle. This beautiful altar, with its five consecration crosses, stands just feet away from the site of the high altar of the original, Norman church.

Nick Wright