

Views from the Pews – Cathedrals Again

Amid all the gloom, a near-miracle. Notre Dame de Paris is open for business again. It is worth thinking about how that happened. Yes, the Church must have made an effort, but behind that lay an enormous financial and restoration project, accompanied by unprecedented political focus.

Great churches take on a meaning beyond their liturgical use; witness the night photographs of St Paul's Cathedral during the London Blitz, plus a thousand other images of cathedrals and other places of worship which take on a life of their own, encompassing secular meanings which are usually to do with the identity of a town, a city, or a people. Notre Dame's restoration was impelled by social, emotional and civic needs beyond those of its congregation. Those needs included the just-in-time rescue of ancient crafts which have much more influence over our identity than we care to think.

The cathedral's re-opening has received much publicity, publicity which speaks to needs beyond the purely religious.

We need to bear this in mind when contemplating the daunting task of earthquake-strengthening for our own building. Let us not for a moment underestimate the public effect this project will have. New Zealand's townscapes are almost unique, in that our urban buildings seem to have a very short life and, when distinctive buildings are lost, there is a palpable sense of grief which is nevertheless buried by cries for 'progress'. Too many of our towns are starting to look the same, as brick and masonry give way to even less permanent metal products.

So let us approach this project with pride, as we occupy one of the few hills in Hamilton, and enjoy excellent sight-lines from many points in the city. Let us study what went right in Paris, how the money was raised, what political strings got pulled, and how things got done. We belong to a branch of Christianity which still believes in large, highly visible buildings. We believe in being seen.

Lastly though, we must not delay just because the engineering goalposts might change with the political winds of the day. Earthquakes are probably the least predictable of all Creation's elements. We probably know folk who were caught in Christchurch's Anglican Cathedral; we owe it to future generations to try and mitigate those risks as best we can. Especially now we have examples in Paris, and in Coventry, to name but two.

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