

October 2024: Where's your favourite church?

A few weeks ago, I had a conversation with someone about churches they had visited. As they shared some of what they had enjoyed most, and as we discovered some of the 'likes' we had in common, and some of our differences, I found myself reflecting on what puts a church I visit onto my list of 'favourite churches.'

Although I'm not usually a 'fan' of elaborate decoration in churches, the soaring grandeur of the stonework in some cathedrals has certainly made it onto my list of favourites, especially where I have memories of almost empty cathedrals echoing with my footsteps as I walk. But I love too the relative simplicity of the new Coventry cathedral, and one of my all-time favourite churches is the chapel at a monastery, which is extremely bare, which has a silence that is palpable, and which has its own particular brand of cold, even on the warmest of days!

My list of favourite churches also contains some where I can barely recall any of their details except for some modern stain glass windows, and one church that I love purely for its churchyard, which it began managing for conservation in the 1980s, as part of the 'Living Churchyard' project, and which is now an incredible haven of colour and fragrance and birdsong all year round. I love some churches that are unusual; one that is octagonal and one that is not a church at all, but a simple worshipping space in an old stone shed. And many of the churches on my 'favourites' list are tiny, notable partly for their size – or lack of it – and mainly because they are places where passers-by leave prayers.

My favourite churches vary hugely; some are modern, some are ancient, some are tiny, some are vast, some are elaborate, some are plain, some are clearly home to vibrant worshipping communities, some aren't. But they all have one thing in common. They are all places that for me are what theologians sometimes call 'thin places,' places where heaven and earth seem particularly close. They are all places where I find it easy to sense God's presence. They are all places that, once I am there, I am reluctant to leave. They are all places that draw me back.

My prayer this month is for all those who visit our nation's churches, maybe out of interest in the history, maybe out of curiosity, maybe seeking prayer or worship, or something they cannot define. My prayer is that each of our churches will be a place where someone finds what they are looking for, will be for someone a 'thin place.' And my prayer for us all, is that we too will find those places that are 'thin places' for us.

Yours in Christ,
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