

## Column

I write this column while in England, a few days after attending a conference in Oxford, “that sweet city with her dreaming spires,” to quote Thomas Arnold.

A number of things have changed here – not just in Oxford but throughout the UK – since I was here in 2018. Very sadly, a number of retail establishments and restaurants that have been around for half a century or longer have gone away. Blame it on covid, I guess you could say.

More troubling still is the drift from Christian values and mores. London, in particular seems to be given wholly to hedonism and debauchery, at least that is the impression one gets from banners and placards along the major thoroughfares. It is definitely not the same city I encountered 41 years ago on my first visit. For example, in those far off days, there was no mistaking which day was the “Lord’s Day”. At least within the royal square mile of the City of London, it was virtually impossible to

find a place to eat on Sunday. Churches were open; shops and restaurants closed.

But there have been some bright spots as well. The first thing I encountered as I dragged my suitcase along a busy pedestrian shopping street upon arriving in Oxford was the Gospel being announced. Students from a local church were taking the message of Jesus to where the people were, in much the same way St. Paul had done in his day on Mars Hill in Athens (Acts 17). No wild-eyed extremists, these were earnest young people seeking to fulfil the mission God had had given them.

Another bright spot was attending my regular church in London – the Temple Church. The oldest section of this edifice was built in 1185 by the Knights Templar following the First Crusade. Over 800 years later, people of all ages continue to gather here to praise and thank God for His matchless works, to offer prayers for their needs and others, to be baptized and to be joined together in holy wedlock.

A final bright spot came while seated in the garden of friends in the rural county of Shropshire. Another couple had come round for a visit, and during the course of conversation, the husband asked me about the future, in particular about the future of civilization and the planet. From that starting point, I was able to share, albeit briefly, a word of Christian hope.

My message to him went along these lines: history is going somewhere. It's not just a jumble of dates and events, without purpose, meaning or hope. Life is to be lived in the light of the God who so loved the world that He sent His Son and whose purpose and plan is to make all things new (Revelation 21:5).

What makes this enquiry a bright spot is: no matter how secularized the age; people remain wired for God. The trinkets of the world are not enough to satisfy the deepest longing of the human heart. We in the Church – that includes all baptized people, not just clergy -- have a Gospel (good news) to proclaim. More than that, we have been given people with whom to share it. They are all around us.

Take courage. Seize every opportunity for Christ. Dare to do your part. God is in control.

*O GOD, who hast prepared for those who love thee such good things as pass man's understanding; Pour into our hearts such love toward thee, that we, loving thee above all things, may obtain thy promises, which exceed all that we can desire; through Jesus Christ our Lord, Amen. (Collect for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity from the Book of Common Prayer)*

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