

Column

Driving along backroads throughout the rural South, you are likely to encounter a number of 'shrines to the past'. I am thinking of abandoned churches. Most are built of wood. Often there is a modest tower or spire, sometimes with a bell. Many have graveyards, each has a story to tell.

Once on a Christmas afternoon, I came upon such a church. It was in a town that had almost faded away. Something compelled me to pull over and try the door. Finding it open, I stepped inside. What first caught my eye was that someone had put sprigs of holly with red berries in vases on the altar. There was something about that sight I have never forgotten. There was life here after all.

Later I learned that while most of the families who had once lived in a thriving farming community around the church had died or moved away, two families remained. They kept faith with those who had gone before by tending and keeping the church open. Services were held there several times a year.

Another church I came upon while driving through the country was not as fortunate as this one. Apparently, there was no one left to look after it. It lay empty with the roof collapsing.

I learned from someone in that community that it had once been occupied by a thriving African American congregation. What caused its demise no one seemed to know, but the rumor was that the building was 'haunted'. Teenagers would go out at night looking for a thrill. Later I understood that what remained of the building burned.

Both churches were in a sense 'shrines to the past' inasmuch as a group of Christians, one white the other black, desired to have a place to worship and sacrificed to make that dream come true. There is no reason to believe that the word of God was not truly preached in these two buildings. Yet eventually both fell on hard times.

What are we to make of abandoned or almost abandoned church buildings? Two things come to my mind.

First, they stand as testaments to the faith of those who built them. What these faithful souls did for the Lord won't be lost in eternity. Paul tells us as much in 1 Corinthians 15:58: "Therefore, my beloved brethren, be ye stedfast, unmoveable, always abounding in the work of the Lord, forasmuch as ye know that your labour is not in vain in the Lord." So let us imagine and work for the Lord.

Secondly, these abandoned or almost abandoned buildings should remind us of the nature of this present age. The element of transitoriness is built into its very fabric.

We should work hard with our hands. We should build buildings and plant gardens. We should be good stewards of the environment, but even as we do, we must never forget that we live and work in a rented field. Our eyes must therefore be kept on eternity.

A better world is coming, a world where death and sorrow, change and decay will be done away.

When viewed like this, these ‘shrines to the past’ can become signposts to the future.

LORD of all power and might, who art the author and giver of all good things; Graft in our hearts the love of thy Name, increase in us true religion, nourish us with all goodness, and of thy great mercy keep us in the same; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (Collect for the Sixth Sunday after Trinity, Book of Common Prayer)

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