

On Advent Sunday 2011 the newly-restored Shrine of St Richard was dedicated by the Bishop of Chichester. Below are an introductory article by the Surveyor of the Fabric and the Homily given by the Dean at the Service.

A Note on the Design of the Reordering

The shrine of Saint Richard was splendid, bejewelled silver gilt, until it was despoiled in 1538-9. Of that shrine only the platform and the wooden screen (an early 16th century introduction by Bishop Sherbourne) has come down to us.

The modern restoration of the shrine commenced in 1905 when an altar was re-established on the site of the shrine and use of the shrine area became a part of the Cathedral's worship.

The reordering, now completed, builds upon the work of the 1970's and 1980's which enhanced the significance of the shrine by defining the space and integrating it with the eastern chapels, especially the Lady Chapel. This has been achieved by simple means; the shrine platform has been cleared of all furniture apart from the altar, which has been set back about 18 inches to facilitate safe movement up and down the steps, and to enhance the feeling of space around the altar. The statue of Saint Richard has been re-sited on the retrochoir floor at the southern free-standing retrochoir pier and this is balanced by the re-siting of the Saint Richard icon at the northern pier. New kneelers and candle stands are placed at a little distance in front of the shrine. The "Richard" stone, previously laid flat, has been raised and set below the altar with the saint's name gilded. The surfaces of the altar platform have been cleaned, removing much black wax to reveal the grey coloured stone which now sits much more comfortably with all the adjacent materials and the cleaned tapestry.

New standard candles frame the altar (the small Geoffrey Clarke candles are relocated to the St John the Baptist altar) and the front of the shrine platform is adorned with two banner crosses.

All the new elements, executed in cast aluminium, are the work of the artist Jonathan Clarke, the son of Geoffrey Clarke. Cast aluminium responds in a rewarding way to the limestone and Purbeck marble of the church. Keeping the palette of materials simple brings a unity and sense of place to this most significant location in the cathedral. Only Richard's name is gilded on the shrine platform, thus relating the stone to the statue and the icon.

A pilgrimage place is a place of movement and at Chichester the retrochoir is like a crossroads in the building. This presents many challenges especially when allied with the understated character of the shrine (visitors asking "where is the shrine" when standing at it). The new banner crosses are located so that they come into the visitors' view as they progress along the south or north aisle; the crosses rise high above one's head encouraging the visitor to look up, perhaps to catch the sight of the sculpture of Christ in Judgement. Each cross seems to be planted into the shrine platform.

When one turns into the retrochoir the new vertical elements create a kinetic sense of space; each element moving against the other, the scene changing with one's movement until standing directly in front of the altar all the elements come together to frame the place of the shrine, the focus of which is the stone below the altar.

Historically, the shrine was used in conjunction with the Lady Chapel and so the redesign has been conceived to work with the Lady Chapel. Viewed from the Lady Chapel the aspect of the shrine is enhanced, the banner crosses making an enclosing frame to the altar which is dignified by tall candles which can be clearly seen even above the heads of other pilgrims standing in the retrochoir. Above and behind the head of a celebrant at the altar, the shining cross, worked into the tapestry, can be clearly seen.

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Surveyor of the Fabric

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The Dean's Homily

'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the House of God, and this is the Gate of Heaven'.

So said Jacob in what our reading from Genesis has described as 'a certain place'. What set it apart from other places was that there, Jacob had had a genuine experience of God. He named the place 'Beth-el' – House of God – because in that particular location God had revealed himself, and surely would again. It was the place where Jacob dreamed of a ladder, set up between Heaven and earth; and so he placed a sacred stone there and created a Shrine.

The image of the stone occurred also in our second reading, from the First Letter of Peter – written to a young church facing the harsh experience of persecution. This time, the writer spoke of the cornerstone laid in Zion – a clear reference to the Temple – the cornerstone which is now Jesus Christ, chosen and precious.

The true ladder between earth and Heaven is Jesus, who binds together his people, like stones in a building, as living agents of his Kingdom: Jesus, who has brought light where there was darkness, mercy where there was despair; Jesus who himself had passed through rejection to triumph. For the writer of the Epistle and for those with ears to hear, the glory of the Lord, foretold by the prophet, had been revealed, and the mouth of the Lord had spoken it.

But there is a warning in this Scripture: a warning that the builders had rejected the stone, and for them it had become a stumbling-block. It is a warning to Christ's followers, at a time of testing, that they must hold fast to their faith, and in spite of unpromising circumstances and an uncertain future, to continue to proclaim the mighty acts of God.

That same theme was taken up by Bishop Eric Kemp in a sermon about St Richard

from which we shall be reading in a few minutes. He reminds us that Richard's short, but greatly blessed ministry in this place and in this diocese, was exercised amid the harsh conditions of 13th century life in Sussex: hard labour, student poverty, dispossession, hostility from secular authorities: it all has a startlingly contemporary ring...

Richard has been portrayed as 'the laughing bishop': it is an attractive image; but, in the circumstances of his age, he needed to be – and certainly was – stern, austere, disciplined and strong-willed. Yet Bishop Eric reminds us that, through it all, Richard radiated love and joy. This was on account of his sure faith in the Lord, whom he already knew, loved and followed, and longed to do so more adequately.

Ever since Richard's death, seven and a half centuries ago, people have come to this Cathedral, and particularly to his Shrine, to pray; even in the years of bitter conflict that saw its desecration, they brought their hopes and their fears; and ever since, in times of joy and sorrow, in war and peace, they have come. They come still, every day, whether they are able to articulate it or not, to seek pardon and peace, health, strength and renewal; and the petitions which they leave behind, move us greatly.

As we follow Bishop John, the latest successor to Bishop Richard, Bishop Barlow, Bishop Day, Bishop Bell, Bishop Wilson, Bishop Kemp – all of whom have been laid to rest in the Shrine – for the act of Rededication, we should pray that we may become more faithful disciples of Jesus amid the upheavals of our own turbulent age.

As we regard the Shrine, in all its new and stark simplicity, we should make our prayers; and, inspired today by Bishop Eric's words, we should ask that we may borrow some of Richard's tough courage, and his qualities of heart and mind and spirit. As we do so, we may be certain that we shall be aided by his prayers as we continue our own journey.

As we add our petitions to all those that have been offered at St Richard's Shrine, and have made it such a holy and special place, may we know our Lord more clearly, love Him more dearly and follow Him more nearly, now and to the end of our days. Amen.
