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STONES THAT SING

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With generous support from many of you, and with an "entourage" of hangers-on like myself, the Choir of Saint John's completed its week's residence in the Cathedral of Saint Mary and Saint Chad in Lichfield, England, this past August. We were blessed with cool weather and sunshine, gracious hospitality from the cathedral clergy, unpretentious but comfort-able lodgings just a few minutes' walk from the cathedral in an 18th century coaching inn, good beer, and good cheer. The choir worked very hard – two rehearsals a day – and under the able leadership of Brian Taylor and Stephen Branyon (assisted by Rich Mays), completed its ambitious choral program – evensong daily, and the Sunday morning liturgy. (You can see Betty Ann Foran's photos of the trip at: www.pbase.com/eaf/lichfield_england. Slides will be shown at our first Wednesday night class on Sept. 19th.)

It was a great joy to me both to return to England after almost twenty years' absence, and to share something of its cultural and spiritual treasures with my fellow-travellers. Lichfield has the great advantage of being off the tourist highway, and (like Savannah) having been spared the ravages of too much success: it is still in many respects a quiet cathedral town, medieval in its bones and Georgian in its dress, a setting familiar to readers of Anthony Trollope's Barchester novels. Despite the rigours of the 16th century reformation, bombard-ment and vandalism in the 17th century, heavy-handed renovation in the 18th, sometimes over-zealous restoration in the 19th, noise and pollution in the 20th, the cathedral's ancient beauty remains; its three spires (the "three ladies of the vale") are reflected still in the calm waters of the Minster Pool; the intimate peace of its close is intact.

Lichfield's minster is not particularly large, as medieval cathedrals go, but large it certainly is, tens of thousands of tons of stone. Even now, its size remains impressive. When it was first built, its superhuman scale must have been overwhelming. (It is no surprise to learn that it took over a hundred years to complete.) To some degree this size was dictated by the functional requirements of elaborate liturgies and large crowds. Yet practical considerations alone cannot justify the height of the stone vaults, the intricate tracery of its enormous windows, the spread of its flying buttresses, the serried ranks of arcades and aedicules piled up on each other and topped by pinnacles and spires. Such a building can be explained only in terms of its symbolic function. It is meant to evoke the awe of Jacob: "Surely the Lord is in this place!"

... this is none other but the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven" (Genesis 28:17).

For all its scale, however, the effect of the building is not one of mass but of light, an effect achieved by means of the style known as "gothic". In the view of the great architectural historian, John Summerson, Gothic architecture "is something resulting from a profound desire to escape from the remorseless discipline of gravity, a desire to dissolve the heavy prose of building into religious poetry; a desire to transform the heavy man-made temple into a multiple, imponderable pile of heavenly mansions."

Thus the massive pillars supporting the vaults are rendered as bundles of slender colonettes. Walls are overlaid with blank arcades, or are replaced by a filigree of stone tracery whose interstices are filled with glass. (Originally they were plastered and painted so that in principle there was no difference between windows and walls, and the whole interior became a jewel box of glowing colour.) Pointed arches, flying buttresses, crocketed gables, pinnacles, and spires, lent a touch of the fantastic to this visionary architecture, and myriad niches, each with its own canopy, provide a place for images of countless saints. Summerson says that it represents "the ambition to dissolve architecture from the substantial to the insubstantial". One might equally well speak of it as the transfiguration of architecture: a building that has slipped the bonds of earthly gravity, and has been taken up into Spirit; an image in stone of the heavenly Jerusalem, the city of God. This building is a sermon, and its text is: "In my Father's house are many mansions" (John 14:2).

Dr. Carson pointed out to me, that it is in the act of worship – in Evensong, rendered with good music well sung, and prayers and lessons well read – that the building comes to life. In that act, we perceive this building as something more than an aesthetic objet d'art, a cultural-historical artefact, or a utilitarian box for liturgy. When we sing in them, they sing with us: in the rational worship of the Church (Romans 12:2), in words that are said and sung, these mute stones cry out (Luke 19:14), and they are one with us in our praise.

The Rev'd Gavin G. Dunbar

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