

Talking Cents

November 2016

Talking Cents is an ecumenical group charged by the Anglican Diocesan Council to promote an alternative to current economic and political thought, and to encourage debate within the Church. Ministry Units are encouraged to distribute these articles. This issue is contributed by David Hall, a member of the Auckland Anglican Social Justice Group.

Tourism and the Church

Hospitality has been an integral part of Christian life since the earliest days. In the Middle Ages monasteries were the equivalent of the tourist hotel. So, in some ways, the Church has been part of the “tourism” business since earliest times.

During a recent visit to Greece and Italy I began to see just how the local church and tourism are still very closely integrated. This was my first visit to this part of the world, so I was keen to see the “sites” from the Phoenician buried town on the island of Santorini in Greece dating back to 5,000BC to St Peter’s Basilica in Rome.

It was a chance comment by a guide, as we entered St Mark’s Cathedral in Venice, that made me think about the connection between tourism and the Church and the economic impact of that relationship. Our guide said that 25 million people visited St Mark’s annually. That is just over 1,100 visitors per minute all year long assuming that the church is open every day for 10 hours a day. Whether the guide’s numbers are right or not, and I suspect that he may have been talking about the total number of tourists visiting Italy each year rather than St Mark’s, it was obvious that tourism was alive and well in Italy and that the Church plays a key role in Italy’s tourism success.

Earlier in my stay in Italy I went to St Peter’s in Rome as part of a tour group that became “pilgrims” so we could by-pass the long queues waiting to enter this enormous building. Certainly many millions of visitors, both pilgrims and tourists, do see the largest church in the world. It is a marvellous building and one has to admire the efforts of the clergy to ensure that God is there somewhere. However, if the

response of most of the visitors to the Mass that was going on in one of the areas of St Peter’s. Is anything to go by then I really wonder what God must think.

Coming out of a number of the Cathedrals, I was confronted by stalls of artefacts, cloths etc. and hawkers selling all kinds of items. Each time I was reminded of Jesus’ reaction to the money changers in the Temple and wondered if he would react in a similar way in today’s world. I think he would, and I was certainly tempted!!!!

But not all my experiences with churches in Italy were negative. In Assisi I found a real sense of peace as I walked round the tomb of St Francis in the crypt of the lower church. Although both the upper and lower churches were very impressive they were not “over the top”. We were not charged to enter the churches or the crypt and there were no hawkers and stalls immediately outside the church doors. Regrettably, there were armed soldiers searching all who wanted to go onto the church precincts but they were some distance away and as unobtrusive as possible. I experienced a real understanding of St Francis’ commitment, as a follower of Jesus, to Peace and Justice.

The church that worried me the most was, interestingly, also connected to St Francis. It was the Church of St Antony in Padua, some 50km west of Venice. St Antony was a contemporary and follower of St Francis. The church was probably larger than the Assisi churches, with a very large tomb of St Antony that visitors were guided past and then on to see the “relics” of St Antony, his chin and tongue. When I visited the church it was crowded and quite noisy despite requests for silence. The atmosphere in the

church left me very concerned and I skipped the “relics” and went outside only to be met with stalls and hawkers. A hasty retreat for an ice cream saved the day!

It is often said that the great Cathedrals and churches of Europe were built to the “Glory of God” and certainly the skills and resources used would have stretched communities to the limits and sometimes beyond. One example is the beautiful white marble Cathedral in Sienna. Standing on one of the three hills of Sienna it dominates the skyline but it is unfinished. Building was nearly complete when the Black Plague struck in 1348AD and all the stone masons working on the project died. No more were available so work stopped and has never been restarted.

The close relationship between tourism and Churches is not confined to Italy or Catholic churches. The great cathedrals of England are also major tourist attractions and, for many of the smaller Cathedral cities, a major economic contributor to the local area.

My experiences in visiting a number of Italian churches has made me question how “Tourism” and the Church actually mesh. Do we open our churches so that we can continue to pay all the bills? Or do we open our Churches to tourists so that people can experience at least something of God? Or are our churches opened up so that tourism companies can make money?

We, in New Zealand, do not have the breathtaking churches of Italy but we are not immune from the temptations of tourism. The seemingly indeterminate argument about the future of Christchurch Cathedral is an example. Should the Cathedral be rebuilt in the same way as the original or should a new 21st century building replace the damaged edifice? The Diocese, on advice from experts, wanted to demolish the remains of the building on safety grounds and start again; whereas a group of “civically minded” people want the Cathedral to be rebuilt as it was, so that tourists would again be attracted to the building. The arguments have now dragged on for some 5 years - still the ruins remain.

As I have been pondering on these issues I have started to question the apparent rationale for

such magnificent buildings and the enormous resources needed to build them. Were they built to the “glory of God”? If we look at the life of Jesus we do not find him very often in buildings of any kind. Much of his Ministry was the open air. There are very few recorded time when Jesus goes to the Temple in Jerusalem, when he was 12 and when he turned over the trading tables outside the Temple are two examples.

Much of what we know about the early church indicates that meetings were held in private houses or in the open. Nowhere are there any records of buildings specifically dedicated to Christian life and worship. It is only after the conversion of Constantine that dedicated churches and Cathedrals begin to appear.

Much has been written about how the Church changed after Constantine’s conversion, changes in theology, administration, structure etc, but I also wonder how much the great temples to the Greek and Roman gods contributed to the desire to build large edifices to the “glory of God”.

Tourism is nothing new as far as the Church is concerned. Even in the so called Dark Ages there are records of abbots of monasteries and bishops from England regularly visiting Rome. In the 18th century, the British aristocracy sent their sons, and occasionally, their daughters on the “Grand Tour” of renaissance Italy as part of their education. Today, tourism is a major industry worldwide that employs many millions of people. For New Zealand, we are now told that tourism is a greater contributor than the dairy industry to our economic wellbeing. The only things likely to stop tourism would be a major depression or a calamitous world war, or an inequality driven world revolution, so tourism is probably here to stay.

I think the thing that concerns me is when buildings that are built to the glory of God and as centres for worship, teaching and praising of God become “tourist attractions”. It is not so much that people want to visit, but that the “tourism” element becomes the major and only focus of the life of the building. The challenge is that we have to ensure that visiting tourists see our churches as living communities of worship and not just historical edifices.