

From Mark Chapman - July 2024

In the past few months I have been doing the rounds of Oxford college chapels and have been to more choral evensongs.

Chaplain I have taught have been getting me to preach before I retire! The chapels themselves are all rather different – I have preached in dinky little baroque chapels, an enormous gothic chapel, and an audacious neo-Gothic recreation of a fancy church from northern France with impressive windows. I have preached on all sorts of different themes depending on the set readings. I even preached on the book of Nehemiah which is all about building the walls of Jerusalem after the exiles returned from Babylon. In fact, one of the things I will miss most about our garden is the splendid wall which separates our house from Cuddesdon House. It was recently repaired and is looking very spick and span. It was presumably built originally to keep animals and people from straying into the park around the old Bishop's Palace.

This all got me thinking about walls A few years ago when I was leading a tour around Oxford for the new students at the College I was asked whether the walls around the colleges were built to keep the people out or to keep the students in. I laughed, but the more I thought about it, the more interesting I found the question – there's a double function to walls. Walls keep people in and walls keep people out – prisons are an obvious example. I am old enough to have spent some time in East Berlin – on several occasions, I waited to cross at Checkpoint Charlie and Friedrichstrasse station. There were two very different political systems separated by a wall with a very secure gate. But alongside the physical wall there was also a mental wall of mutual suspicion which characterised the Cold War. And there are so many contemporary examples of walls of separation – in the gated communities of South Africa or in America which separate affluence from poverty. And most poignantly we have the wall that separates Israel and Gaza – a wall that was breached with such disastrous consequences.

For Christians, we are often reminded that God doesn't live behind

walls or in Temples – God doesn't need security and can't be protected by walls. Instead, God goes outside the walls of the city – in Jesus, God leaves the containment of the walls of the heavenly city and goes to the world outside where he dines with the tax collectors and mixes with the outsiders and cures the lame and the possessed. God's love for us all is glimpsed as he takes the risk of leaving the protection of his walls, and moving out into the messy and dirty and beautiful world that he redeemed. And that is an invitation to all of us – to move out from beyond our own walls to see how we can share that love in whatever ways we can with the world outside.

God Bless,

Mark