

# Thought for the Day August 17 – 23: Castles

## By Geoff Oates, Lay Reader

### Monday

#### Castles - Another wander through some old holiday snaps...

After beaches, the great staple of the English holiday outing is...the castle. Since childhood I have spent countless happy hours exploring every tower, every battlement, every spiral staircase and every dungeon I could get into from Dover to Dunstanburgh and from the Rhine to the Alps.

From ancient times the best castles stood on hilltops, as you see in the picture of Bamburgh on the Northumberland coast. It stands as testament to the colour and romance of the Middle Ages, and speaks of strength, confidence and security. They offered shelter and protection to people and livestock.

One of the most common and powerful images for God in our Old Testament scriptures is 'Rock'. Psalm 62: 'The LORD is my rock, and my fortress, and my deliverer' I could have mentioned Psalm 18, Proverbs 18, 2 Samuel 22....and many more. The image is not of a mere pile of stone, but of a fortified hilltop. 'Strong tower' is another common image.

David, the warrior King, chose the rock of Zion, the highest of the hills that now make up Jerusalem, as his stronghold.

A Rock is not just of shelter and security in times of turmoil, but a vantage point, a watchtower from where we have a clearer, broader vision of all that surrounds us.

Even when we feel life is hemming us in, besieging us with trials, God our Rock gives us safety, and hope and perspective for the future.



## Tuesday

### Castle Ruins – Caerphilly (Gwent/Glamorgan)

Our turbulent national history (notably the the long-disputed borders between England and Wales and England and Scotland) have left us with a remarkable legacy of ruined castles. These were the ones that did not find a new use in the post-mediaeval economy and were fortuitously too remote to be plundered for building materials.

The existence of our stone castles is really a testament to the violence, insecurity and injustice that dominates so much of our history. They tell of strength, but also of disunity and fear; of a squabbling military aristocracy that relied on stone walls and weaponry to keep their rivals, and their peasant populations, often newly conquered, under control.

At the end of the Civil War, when the old castles played a role in armed conflict for the last time, Cromwell's Parliamentarians blew holes in their walls and put them permanently out of service. The ordinary population didn't miss them at all.

Anyone who knows the story of the Fall of Jericho (Joshua 6) will know that the God of Israel also had little respect for stone fortifications.

But he has to remind the Kings and rulers of Judah and Israel again and again, through the words of Amos, Micah, Isaiah and Jeremiah, that they too should not put their trust in stone battlements. Instead they should gain the favour of God by obedience to his commandments of justice.

They didn't listen. The walls of Jerusalem could not save the city when Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon broke them down in 586 BC. The walls lay in ruins for 140 years.



# Wednesday

## Castle of Dreams

When young Prince Ludwig of Bavaria looked out from his bedroom window in his father's 'country' palace on the edge of the Alps, he saw the ruins of an ancient castle on a steep pinnacle of rock. And he dreamed.....

The castle he built at Neuschwanstein has probably graced the front page of more tourist brochures than any other. Few realise that it was built in the 1870s.

Irrational, fantastic, but a stunning testament to romantic ideals of beauty and chivalry, it was a cry of protest against the industrialised Realpolitik of Kaiser Wilhelm's new Germany.

Of course, it helps if you're a Prince or a King. Ludwig was wise enough to know that the realities of life in the middle ages were very different from the ideals, but he followed his dream.

Despite his popularity among ordinary Bavarians, his extravagance and eccentricity were too much for the Establishment. He was deposed in a family coup d'état and died in mysterious circumstances. But his memory is revered in modern Bavaria – if only as the unintentional founding father of Bavaria's flourishing tourist industry.

God has a soft spot for dreamers, even if their dreams appear controversial or divisive at first. Remember Joseph, whose bizarre dreams also drove his brothers to the brink of fratricide. He didn't have the wealth of a prince, but with the guidance and protection of God he delivered his dream and saved his family, and the whole of Egypt, from starvation.



# Thursday

## Sandcastles

Castles are meant to be all about permanence, durability, strength. But for most of us, our first encounter with a castle was the exact opposite – building a sandcastle on a childhood holiday!

Sandcastles didn't last long, as many a child's tears have testified. If the feet of fellow holidaymakers or seaside donkeys didn't bring down our carefully crafted towers and battlements, the tide would do the job.

I suspect there is something of King Cnut in every child. I loved to pile up ramparts of sand in the face of the advancing waves, to watch the first stream of water flood into the moat and flow back, repulsed by my handiwork.

But of course the smallest child soon learns that it is only a matter of time, no matter how fervently he or she shovels fresh sand onto the crumbling walls, before the rising water floods in and a hasty retreat must be made through the cold water, back to the family picnic blanket.

To everything there is a season .....a time to build up, a time to break down.

(Ecclesiastes 3 v5 – Pete Seeger's paraphrase from the words of 'Turn! Turn! Turn!')

In the Bible God reminds us time after time that human endeavours are not meant to last forever.

But that does not make them meaningless. We are each granted our time in the sunshine, to do what we can for as long as we can – and to trust that, when the time comes, we can still retreat with dignity. Our God will be waiting for us with a big, warm dry beach towel.





## Friday

### Castles of Steam – Ogmore Castle

Yes, it is a Castle! But this time a castle of steel, speed and steam.

Charles Collet designed a class of 171 express passenger locomotives for the Great Western Railway in 1923 and named them after castles in Wales and south west England. Eight survive in preservation. In their day, they were the most powerful locomotives in the UK.

With rare exceptions, notably Richard Jones' hymn 'God of concrete, God of steel', the Church has not looked to technology and industry to find new expressions of divine truths. But to me, a steam locomotive is pure Pentecost!

The tongues of fire and the water of baptism combine to produce a rushing wind – steam. Steam that is readily harnessed to drive action, motion, change.

Fire alone may warm and comfort us, water alone may refresh and cleanse us. Combined as steam, they will take us somewhere new!

You still need a driver, ever alert, watching the route and the signals, and knowing when to open the regulator or apply the brakes. You still need a fireman, doing the hot and heavy shovelling work for mile after mile.

You will need fresh water at regular intervals, and fresh fuel. A steam engine can only run so far on its own resources.

Does this sound anything like your journey of faith?

*God of piston and of wheel, God of pylon, God of steam  
all the world of power is thine.*



## Saturday

### An English(wo)man's home is his/her castle

It's not really a castle. The Gothic stone tower is a 19<sup>th</sup> century addition to a 15<sup>th</sup> Century manor house.

You might recognise Shibden Hall, near Halifax, as the setting for the BBC drama 'Gentleman Jack', but the Oates's of the West Riding like to imagine it as our ancestral home, since our presumed antecedent William Otes built the original half-timbered portion back in 1420.

It didn't stay in the family for long, and the genealogical lines are sketchy, but what does that matter when you are trying to find your roots? Especially when you live in exile.

'Home' is a dominant theme through our scriptures. Abraham, the nomadic herdsman, was promised a homeland for his descendants by his God. The great narratives of the Old Testament tell of an exiled people – first in slavery in Egypt, then as captives in Babylon – longing for their homeland, their Temple and their God. Exiled but not abandoned, for each time it is their God who seeks them out and guides them home.

Jesus was born at a time when the people of Israel were back in their homeland, but he came to a place of political and spiritual turmoil and frustration. He called the people to seek another home, His Father's home, that place of 'many mansions' in the clumsy but wonderfully expressive translation of the King James version. A home for all the exiles of the earth now and in all ages, but a home whose open door each one of us can find today, right where we are.



# Sunday

## Ruins II – an alternative viewpoint

Wupatki is a long abandoned fortified village in Arizona, USA. It was occupied from ca 1040 AD. by a people we now describe as 'Ancestral Puebloans'. They abandoned it ca 1220 AD, probably when climate change made their agricultural way of life unviable, and their descendants are now the Puebloan tribes further south in New Mexico.

When European Americans first stumbled upon the ruins of Wupatki, the native Americans were rather bemused at their fascination with their pile of old stones. The Navajo people that had moved into the area were semi-nomadic, with no interest or emotional connection to old masonry.

They were built, they said, by the Anasazi. White aficionados of native heritage speculated for decades about who the Anasazi might have been, until they realised that, in the Navajo tongue, the word simply means 'someone else's ancestors'.

Wupatki became a National Monument and steps were taken to restore the ruins and protect them from further decay. The native peoples were perplexed. If we keep everything that has ever been made, they said, the world will fill up and one day there will be no more room. With their deep sense of history, they believed that everything decays in its own time. Nothing should last longer than its natural span, and certainly not for ever.

The National Park authorities have reversed their restoration measures, and now leave the site to the elements. Though I'm sure it will be around for a few generations yet.

*"Though with care and toil we build them, tower and temple fall to dust,  
But God's power, hour by hour, is my temple and my tower."  
(Joachim Neander)*

