

13th June 2022

Steeple

“Giraffes! – a People
Who live between the earth and skies,
Each in his own religious steeple,
Keeping a lighthouse with his eyes.”
Roy Campbell, *Dreaming Spires* (1946)

My father-in-law, a minister in the Church of Scotland from the 1940s onwards, was involved over the years in visiting congregations around Scotland on Church business. If there were two or three church buildings in a town he'd not visited before, he could tell which was the newer church and what tradition it came from by the height of its steeple – before he found the church's name on its noticeboard.

Traditionally, a steeple signifies a church's upward-orientation to God, worship rising like an arrow, upwards towards the divine. But does size matter? We who, like Roy Campbell's giraffes, live between earth and skies, have our own religious steeples, showing the direction of our purpose and devotion. But is a big steeple more of an indication of our commitment than a smaller one? Does a tall steeple show we are more holy than those in a church with no steeple at all?

Before I got to my second parish, the crumbling Victorian steeple had been removed, leaving the church with a dumpy, steeple-less tower. Did that diminish the faithfulness of that congregation? Were they less Christian than the lighthouse-tall-steeple congregation down the road?

Last month the Church of Scotland held its General Assembly. Two things are worth noting in this context: first, the approval of a *Declaration of Friendship* between the Church of Scotland and the Roman Catholic Church; second, an address from a Rabbi. In both Christian collaboration and inter-Faith cooperation there was no sense of “I've got a bigger steeple than you”, or “My relationship with God out-does yours”. There was togetherness, respect, tolerance and openness, for the good of all.

Let's build our steeples if we chose. Let them be symbols of where we stand with God. Indeed, let them even showcase the skills of an architect or builder. But let them not be competitive. And if they come close to “keeping a lighthouse”, let our light shine with togetherness.

A prayer for today

“Come now! Let us worship together,” says the Lord. Together, indeed. Amen