When I was at theological college twenty years ago a favourite Saturday occupation among a certain class of ordinand was the phenomenon known as the church crawl. While respectable undergraduates were still in bed, small groups of trainee clergy would gather in the car park and head off for the mediaeval churches of East Anglia. What the locals thought as a carload of strange young men – strange in the sense of unfamiliar, you understand! – arrived in sleepy Norfolk villages, I'm not sure.

Nearly always we were alone when visiting these beautiful churches. Perhaps the odd stalwart – a flower arranger or cleaner – hard at work, but otherwise the buildings were empty. Now as then, visit a beautiful village church on a Saturday and nearly always you will find it open, well cared-for, but empty of visitors. If on the other hand you chose to visit a ruined abbey, the picture is very different. Take the roof and the windows off a mediaeval church and suddenly it becomes a magnet for visitors. At Binham and Thetford in Norfolk, there is a steady flow of visitors every weekend; and at the great Yorkshire abbeys at Fountains and Rievaulx or Tintern on the River Wye, people come in their hundreds and thousands: you meet all sorts: dreamy-eyed couples, harassed parents with young families, tourists from all of the world – as well of course as the odd carload of seminarians!

What is it that makes people want to visit these sites? I suppose the obvious answer is the attraction of peace and relative solitude. Fountains Abbey is visited more for its tranquillity than for the architectural interest of its west front. But I like to think that there is another reason too – a continuing fascination with these holy places and with what it was that motivated large numbers of men and women to dedicate their lives to God in these remote corners of our country. These are places ‘where prayer has been valid’, and something of that sense of devotion and worship still clings to the buildings, ruined though they are.

In their heyday, the abbeys were the powerhouses of mediaeval society, centres both of vast agricultural activity and of hospitality for travellers and pilgrims. But the industry outside the monastery was paralleled by a different sort of industry inside. Outside was the noise of agricultural labour, but inside was the ordered pattern of worship: the seven daily offices and the mass, sung to plainsong chant according to a variety of local usages. The monasteries were constructed to house this round of liturgy; in fact the abbey churches have been described as the embodiment of plainsong – plainchant in stone. In origin that was an aesthetic observation, a comment on their appearance, but recent archaeological discoveries have shown it to be true structurally too. In the foundations pottery vases have been discovered. They were placed there as acoustic jars to enhance the resonance of the buildings. These churches were built to be vast musical instruments, sounding posts to amplify and accompany the monks’ and nuns’ devotions. It’s a sublime effect that you can catch in the chancel here and, perhaps supremely, in the Lady Chapel at Ely Cathedral. Sing a note and effortlessly the building takes it up and continues to sing long after you yourself have fallen silent.

Why this long digression on monastic architecture? Well, because the mediaeval abbeys are, I think, rather a good analogy for the workings of God’s grace. The grace of God is a building we inhabit, a building that strengthens and supports the song of our lives. Listen to today’s second reading from Paul’s letter to the church at Rome: ‘...we are at peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ, who has given us access to that grace in
which we now live; and we exult in the hope of the divine glory that is to be ours’ (REB). In that short sentence, Paul gives us a concise summary of his whole theology. The emphasis is on three nouns - peace, grace and glory. Each corresponds to a stage in the life of faith: peace to the past, grace to the present, glory to the future. Peace is what has been restored to us in Christ: the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keeping our hearts and minds in the knowledge and love of God. Glory, the attribute of God, is what we look forward to in the fully realised kingdom of heaven. But it is grace that we experience now.

Grace has often been a problem for Christian theology. The sixteenth-century Reformation was very largely a controversy about the nature of God’s grace and most of us are a little unclear about what precisely grace is. One confused Christian once asked whether grace was a bit like grease. That idea of grace, as a sort of lubricant gunge to ease the operation of the Church’s machinery, is actually not a bad parody of the teaching of the Roman Church during the counter-Reformation.

But if you go back before the Reformation, you find that grace is nothing like grease at all. In the words of the young Thomas Aquinas, grace is simply ‘God’s very mercy itself’. It is the gift of communion with God in Jesus and the Spirit. Grace is simply God with us as gift. And what Aquinas says agrees entirely with Saint Paul, who talks of ‘the grace in which we now live’. The grace of God is the abbey in which we worship. It is the building in which we lead our Christian lives, just as the singing monks and singing nuns inhabited their singing abbeys. Even when roofless and deserted those abbeys speak to us by their silence, but when inhabited they accompanied and strengthened the worship and praise that took place within them. Grace works in just this way: God waiting within us as we wait within God; helping us so that our feeble attempts at love and worship resonate with an unexpected gracious power.

A former parish priest of mine used to say that when coming to church we should never go alone. Always bring someone with you to church, she said. And even if you can’t bring them in flesh and blood then bring them in your prayers. I have always valued that instruction. The Church, because it is the body of Christ, offers itself in prayer and action not for itself, but for the whole world. As we come to church, we must bring people with us, and, as we leave, we must allow God to accompany us. The mediaeval monks and nuns believed that they were serving God, and being the Church, just as much in their labour outside as in their devotion inside. They saw their whole lives as liturgical, and worshipped God in hospitality to strangers, in tilling the soil as well as in singing the liturgy. Each was an indispensable part of their whole Christian discipleship.

The same is true of us. God asks us to worship at all times: in church, yes, but also in our homes, our workplaces, our streets. And we have strength to do this only because God’s grace is the resonating building in which we live.

Mediaeval monasteries were built to embody God’s grace and to resonate with God’s love. And that is our vocation too. Our bodies, as Saint Paul says, are temples of God’s Spirit. Like the Lady Chapel at Ely we are called to resound, body and soul, with God’s love, as we praise God in word and deed. In Christ ‘God’s love has flooded our hearts’, and it is in his strength that we can go out, obedient to the command in today’s gospel, to proclaim that ‘the kingdom of heaven has [indeed] come near’.

In nomine…