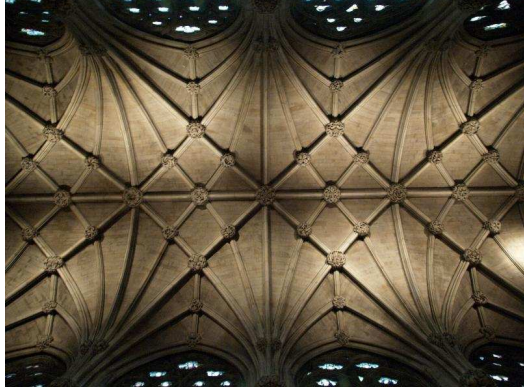


Signs & Symbols: Ceilings 1



A vicar can get a nasty shock when he or she goes into their church for a late morning service and finds a man lying on his back on the floor. Has he taken ill? Has he had an accident? Fortunately in many cases all is well – the man on his back is just looking at the ceiling!

It's a good point – how do you best look at the details in a ceiling in a tall church building without getting a crick in your neck? In many large churches or cathedrals there are mirrors on high trolleys, angled so that you can look down to look up. Other

people prefer a warm cushioned pew to lie on, a pair of binoculars, and a choir or an organ practising in the background.

Ceilings are often under-appreciated in our English churches, unless their decoration is very obvious, such as the wonderful wooden hammer-beam roofs which are nearly always in the eastern counties. Now, if we were in an Orthodox Church our eyes would be naturally led up and up by the wall paintings that tell the story of God in every aspect, until rising quite naturally above the highest level with the apostles and saints to the heavens above and Christ the Lord of all.

Here our decoration is more likely constrained by the style of the ceiling materials. The craftsmen worked with the materials they had, and ornamented what is available in a wide variety of ways: painting the spaces between beams or rafters, carving the ends of beams where they protrude across the aisle or where they rest on a wall bracket, carving 'bosses' where stone ribs meet.

You couldn't even say that the themes used are common, though there's usually a good sprinkling of angels and stars; when we are quite literally given the idea that we are looking up to the heavens. The church building is a place where heaven and earth meet.

This month:

Have a really good long look (not just a quick glance) at the ceiling in your usual church and again at a very different one. What do they have in common? Are there designs or themes that go across them both or is it simply the fact that you have to look up?

(Image - Our Lady and the English Martyrs – Cambridge)

*by The Rev Dr Jo White
a vicar in Derbyshire*

The most basic and powerful way to connect to another person is to listen. Just listen. Perhaps the most important thing we ever give each other is our attention....A loving silence often has far more power to heal and to connect than the most well-intentioned words.

Rachel Naomi Remen