

Signs & Symbols: Altar Rails

When I was a child I had an accident requiring a couple of stitches just beneath my eye. I was so thrilled the other day when I looked in the mirror – the scar has totally disappeared. Must be that new skin cream. Of course I was a little dismayed to find I'd developed a new mark half way down my cheek!

It's funny how things change as we age, isn't it? Things I used to be able to do without even thinking about, like running downhill, are now getting increasingly difficult. When I'm out walking and get to a stile sometimes I have to lift my foot with my hands to get it over. And those days of leaping a five bar gate are well behind me.

Getting down to kneel to pray is still fine – it's the getting up again afterwards that I have trouble with. Which is why I'm so glad we have rails at our altar; not just to lean on when I'm waiting to receive Communion, but to help me get up afterwards.

We can thank Archbishop Laud (1573-1645) for having altar rails. After the Restoration, altar tables were removed from the middle of the chancel and replaced against the East wall of the church. Many of the old chancel screens that separated the whole of the chancel from the rest of the church had been removed or destroyed and this left the altar table 'open' to everyone and everything – including dogs. Altar rails therefore, helped to protect the sanctuary from dogs and keep it a special area accessible only to clergy and servers.

This month have a look at the sanctuary area in your church. Is it protected in some way? If so, consider what are you keeping it safe from, and why.

by The Rev Dr Jo White

As you did it to the least of these...

The early Celts were keenly aware of Christ's command to love our neighbours. This is from 'Celtic Fire'

***Remember the poor when you look out on fields you own,
on your plump cows grazing.***

***Remember the poor when you look into your barn
at the abundance of your harvest.***

***Remember the poor when the wind howls and the rain falls,
as you sit warm in your dry house...***

***The poor have no food except what you feed them,
No shelter except your house when you welcome them,
No warmth except your glowing fire.***

