

The Village Church in Adelboden

The pleasant valley of Adelboden had already been settled centuries before the church was built. The first documents (1409) mentioning the name of the remote mountain valley referred to the inhabitants as "forest people". The church was built in 1433, when 400 - 500 people lived in the village; until then, the "forest people" had to use a difficult and dangerous route - mainly the streambed of the Engstligen River - to attend church in Frutigen. Their request for permission to build their own church was turned down by the monastery at Interlaken and by the Bishop of Lausanne. Twelve independent, one might even say insubordinate, men began to build the church at their own risk. When the church was finished, 56 property owners gave their entire properties as surety against a priest's income. The document certifying this noble deed still exists today.

As so often happens, many legends have arisen around the building of the church. It is said that the square on which it now stands was chosen in a wondrous way: one clear starry night, snow fell in the middle of the meadow at the present location of the church, and showed its cruciform ground plan. The tower may be older than the nave; in earlier times it had a "Käsbissen" roof, the outline of which is still evident in the masonry. A careful observer will also notice that the tower leans slightly towards the south. The reason for this may be that the graveyard was close to the tower until the end of last century, and may have undermined the foundations of the church.

The church has not undergone too many changes in the five centuries since it was built. However, the wooden ceiling and balcony are not original and a stone arch used to separate the choir from the nave. The lighting was poor, since the windows were small. A window on the outside of the choir has an unusual shape: the opening in the shape of a cross forms an "oculus", allowing God's energy to pass out into the profane world. The beautiful arched ceiling was constructed in 1488. It is decorated with white and red stars and, in particular, collared carved ribbons of richly imaginative design.

The choir is dominated and characterized by the stained-glass windows created by Augusto Giacometti in 1937. The windows depict the night at Gethsemane in strong and radiant colours. The colour symbolism shows how faith (violet), love (red) and hope (green) are human qualities which tire and fall asleep, while God's loyalty, indicated by Christ's blue robe, remains awake and protects the weak and weary. These stained-glass windows are not the original ones; earlier stained-glass windows were in place since the 17th century. These were lost, however, and only a few fragments remain today.

The cabinet containing the sacramental objects, which is built into the wall, shows that the church was built during Catholic times. Two old communion vessels are stored here. The two gilded Gothic chalices, which actually belong here, cannot be shown, since they were exchanged for tin copies and 550 francs in the last century. Today they can be seen, inappropriately, in the silver collection of the Historical Museum in Bern. The consecrated cross, pale with age, which is next to the pulpit behind a candlestick, is likewise a reminder of the Catholic era. A double chair is located under the pulpit. It was the parting gift of a minister's wife

in 1649 and is used today as a marriage chair. The choir stalls made out of wood were the seats of honour for Justices of the Peace until the last century. In the middle of the choir is the old christening font.

Leaving the church by stepping down two steps, one sees the tunnel-like entrance to the tower on the left; the impressive thickness of the walls can be seen here. There is a genealogical plaque hanging over the entrance to the tower in which the local artist, Stephan Allenbach, in 1775 depicted the coat-of-arms of the local families at that time. The nave of the church is well proportioned, so that one has the impression of being in a large chamber. Stephan Allenbach painted quotations from the Bible in beautiful Gothic letters along the front of the balcony. These reflect the strict rules for seating at the time. The women sat on one side, the men on the other. The massive wooden columns were skilfully hewn from trunks of fir trees at the time the church was built. The organ was built in 1953 and has 17 registers. Up until 1856, the church services were accompanied not by the organ but by trombones.

In the tower, which is usually closed, there are four bells that have been there since 1963. These are tuned to E, G, A, and C'. Three of the bells are new, cast in Aarau; one of the bells, however, dates from 1485 and is still in service. One other bell is located in front of the church; according to its inscription it was cast in 1597 and, as stated in old records, cost 35 crowns and a pair of trousers.

Having left the church, we turn our attention to the fresco on the outside wall. It dates from 1471 and depicts only half of the Last Judgement, since the Blessed were washed away by the rain. Hell is presented in the graphic manner typical of that time: a group of devils are torturing the Damned in the lower part of the fresco, for example one gossip's tongue is being torn out with pliers. The meaning of the knight is not clear: he is either one of the horsemen of the Apocalypse or else the heretic King Theoderich. Purgatory appears in the upper part of the picture, while next to it, near the edge, a deceased person is being delivered and assigned by a scribe to the correct section of Hell. Heads of unbaptized children can be seen above this. At the top of the fresco, a priest is holding mass and offering comfort to the Inhabitants of Purgatory; an angel is carrying the soul of one of the dead into heaven. The figure of Christ on the throne is flanked on the observer's right by John the Baptist and six of the Apostles, and on the left by Mary and the other six Apostles. The left side of the fresco is no longer clearly visible; one can just make out Michael with the scales and one of the Blessed, rising from the dead. Conservation of the fresco was carried out with State support in 1965. The church was thoroughly renovated in 1973, and a number of skeletons were uncovered in the nave. Wall paintings were not found but merely the inscription: "Let us not sleep like the others". With the renovation the church became a peaceful and friendly center of the Village.

The entrance gate prides a memorial to bomber pilots who escaped or were shot down and interned in Adelboden during the Second World War. It is to be hoped that these buildings and gardens will continue to provide comfort for those who are troubled and anxious.