



SAINT THOMAS CHURCH FIFTH AVENUE
in the City of New York
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, Rector
www.SaintThomasChurch.org

Sunday, October 4, 2020
The Feast of the Dedication of the Church

Solemn Eucharist

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A Sermon by
The Reverend Canon Carl F. Turner, *Rector*
on
1 Kings 8:22-30, Hebrews 12:18-24, and Matthew 21:12-16
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“We saw his glory”

I love Dedication Festivals. I love them because I believe that they speak passionately and unashamedly about the Christian Journey and the imperative nature of our Christian calling. They are about Church buildings and what goes on inside them, and I love Church buildings and what goes on in them, so now you know why I love Dedication Festivals.

Now, there are many who will tell you that we should not be concerned with our church buildings, and that they are not at the heart of our mission. I remember visiting my mother many years ago, and the very evangelical Anglican Church near her home had a huge banner across the front of the church. It read, *“Is this a church? No, it is not!”* Well, I know what was intended, but as my mother remarked, “If that isn't a church, then what on earth is it?” We are sometimes too apologetic about our church buildings, but they are special places, set apart, dedicated and consecrated to God. They are part of our Christian Mission precisely because they help us on our Christian Journey and for one very important reason.

Do you remember when the lawyer asked Jesus about which was the greatest commandment? What was Jesus's reply? *“You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength.”* Loving God - worshipping God - is to be at the very heart of our Christian Life together. We should never be ashamed at the extravagance of our Church buildings - the extravagance of that fact that we actually have them! And how true that is here at Saint Thomas Church which, as I have often said, is a gift to the people of New York – an oasis of prayer in the heart of this teeming metropolis. And what goes on in our churches, in *this* church - our attempts to love and worship God; to be close to him and to recognize his presence - is of prime importance. For that reason, our worship needs to be of the highest quality we can offer - the best of our ability - after all, the very word *worship* has its origins in giving something of worth: **worth-ship**.

So, this Feast of the Anniversary of the Dedication of our Church building is a celebration of the first commandment - to love God; to give God the best we have to offer; to attempt to touch God and allow ourselves to be touched with him or, as Wesley put it, to be *“lost in wonder, love and praise.”*

In our first lesson today, King Solomon in all his glory, recognizes that his glory is nothing compared to the glory of God, and at Dedication of the first Temple, he stretches out his hands in prayer and worships, and adores, and pleads for his people. Note the petition at the heart of that adoration and worship: *“Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray toward this place; O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and forgive.”*

O hear in heaven your dwelling place; heed and **forgive**.

And in our second reading today, the writer to the Letter to the Hebrews describes the worship of heaven and the accessibility of God's people. No longer is the Temple a place of division between God and the sinner, but a place of encounter with the living God because the veil of the Temple is no more since Christ's salvific death on the cross has brought down that curtain or diving wall:

"You have come to...the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous made perfect, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant."

The rector of that church near my mother's home was, therefore, being more than a little apologetic - but, of course, you know the point he was making - that what goes on *inside* the church building matters as much as the building itself. So, the Feast of the Anniversary of the Dedication of this Church is also a celebration of those living stones that make up this spiritual temple. As Paul said in his letter to the Ephesians, we are *"Built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the cornerstone. In him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord; in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God."* Ephesians 2:19-22)

Built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God.

So, the Church building is God's house - God's dwelling - because *we* are called to be dwelling-places for God! In John's Gospel we read, *"the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth."* (John 1:14) Here, in this Church, we are called to recognize Christ in our midst and discover him in our very selves. As the Lord himself prayed to the Father on the night before he was crucified, *"The glory that you have given me I have given them, so that they may be one, as we are one, I in them and you in me, that they may become completely one, so that the world may know that you have sent me and have loved them even as you have loved me."* (John 17:22-23).

When we proclaim the Gospel, when we confess our sins; when we receive the Body and Blood of Jesus in Holy Communion, we are growing spiritually as a dwelling-place for God. When we gather, few in number to pray; when we gather to give thanks for a new life, or celebrate the love of two people committing themselves to each other, or weep at the body of someone we have come to bury - God is there in our midst and within us - part of us, sharing our emotions, our hopes, our dreams, our tragedies and our celebrations. As Rowan Williams once said, *"When we come back to our places after taking Communion, we ought to look at our next-door neighbors with awe and amazement. The person next to me - whom I may love deeply, may not know at all, may dislike, may even fear - is God's special, honored guest, praying Christ's prayer, living from Christ's life. Just for this moment, they are touched with the glory of the end of all things; and so are we."*¹

'The glory that you have given me I have given them.'

So, the Dedication Festival is about this beautiful building and about the beautiful stones which make it - the living stones that are beautiful because they are made in the image and likeness of Jesus Christ. That is why Church buildings are often anointed with the holy Chrism at their dedication. Just as the Christian is baptized and also anointed like Jesus the Messiah, so our buildings reflect those same living stones. Similarly, when the priest and ministers kiss the altar as a sign of love for Christ the cornerstone, or kiss the Book of the Gospels as a sign of love for the Word of Life, they echo the kiss of peace in which the living stones, the people of God, recognize Jesus in each other and share his love and peace.

Rowan Williams, speaking once to a clergy synod, said this about the church: *"Our position in the world is now what it was meant to be because we were made for intimacy. We were made for communion. We were made for meaning. And for all those things to come alive again in the presence and the power of Jesus, that is what life in the body of Christ makes possible. That's why the Church is the pilot project for the new humanity."*²

I love that concept - of the Church being the **pilot project** for the new humanity.

But wait! I can hear some of you saying that I haven't actually given the whole picture. And it is true, there is more! For when the lawyer asked Jesus what is the greatest commandment, and Jesus replied *"You must love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength,"* he did not stop there, he carried on: *"This is the greatest and first commandment. And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets."* (Matthew 22:38-39) Thus, the dedication festival is not just about giving the best that we have to offer to God - it is also about searching for God in a broken and troubled world. It is about leaving the House of God, and knowing that, as we ourselves are to be living stones, so God demands that we search him out in other places too. That is how the Church is the pilot project for the new humanity - by loving God *and* loving neighbor. Thank goodness it is at the heart of our own Mission Statement: "to worship, love, and **serve** our Lord Jesus Christ,"

Michael Ramsey once said *"The Christians know the worship of God is to be first of all, and know also that this worship is an idolatrous perversion unless it is reflected in compassion towards the world. 'As the soul is in the body so are the Christians in the world.'"*²

That is why Jesus drove out the money changers in today's Gospel readings. The people had begun to lose sight of what the Temple was for - it had become an end in itself, rather than a means for people to celebrate the presence of God in their lives and around them also. How interesting that it was the *children* who glimpsed the glory and the presence of God in Jesus whereas the Pharisees, who knew the Law and the true purpose of the Temple could not. How poignant that after cleansing the Temple, Jesus healed the blind and the lame who came to him there; the same people whom the Pharisees shunned because they thought that they didn't belong in the Temple because they must have done something very wrong to have become disabled in the first place.

Just as we search for God in this building; just as this building points out the presence of Christ to us; so we must also leave this place and discover Christ in other places too and particularly in the marginalized and the poor.

The pain and anguish of our world; the riots, the sickness, the attempted genocide, the poverty, the unemployment, the anger, the mistrust, the inequality, the prejudice, and all the people who we simply do not understand or may not even like – they, like all the pain and anguish is to be part of our Christian Journey too. For we cannot cut ourselves off from the world. That is why Church building that become exclusive little clubs for the initiated few remain just that - cosy little clubs for the few. But this feast of dedication tells us that not only is this building a triumphant statement about God's presence in the lives of ordinary people, rather, it is also a place for all people and a challenge to us to look that little bit further when we leave the place.

Let me end with some more words of Michael Ramsey: *'In the upper room, washing the feet of the apostles, Jesus vividly revealed the divine glory - the glory of the God who stoops and humbles himself. And in the feet-washing we are shown not only a human example for us to follow but the humility of God's own glory humbling our pride as we look up to humble deity. And then on the hill of Calvary there is the great battle between the glory of God in Christ and the glory of man in those - in all of us - who crucified and crucify him. And divine glory triumphed because divine glory is self-giving love, and the scene of destruction was turned into a scene of love's own victory. And Calvary was not a defeat needing the resurrection to counter- reverse it. No, it was a victory so deep that the resurrection quickly followed to seal it. And Saint John could well write under the picture of the passion as well as under the picture of Bethlehem: "We saw his glory."'*³

¹. 'Tokens of Trust', page 120

². April 5, 2006 Address to Clergy Synod, Diocese of Chelmsford, UK.

³. 'Be still and know'

⁴. Sermon preached on October 1, 1967, in the Church of St. Mary the Virgin, Times Square on the 100th anniversary of the Dedication of the Church.