

My soul has a desire and longing to enter the courts of the Lord
Dedication Festival
St. Paul's, Milford
Sunday 4 October 2015: 8:00 and 9:30

Today we celebrate the dedication and the consecration of this church. Not because of the actual dates involved – there are several. But because the Church provides that a parish may do this today, the first Sunday in October, if the date is unknown or if the parish chooses to do so. I hasten to add that this is different from our Patronal Festival because that day causes us to remember our patron, in our case St. Paul. Today we focus on the building and what it means to us. The foundation stone was laid on 28 May 1978; the church was dedicated some time in 1979 and consecrated on 18 May 1994. It has served us well as the house of God in this place and for all that we give thanks today.

Let's look at today's readings very briefly. They've all been chosen because each in its own way relates to the theme of the dedication or consecration of a church and in particular **this** church.

Today's **Psalm**, number 84, is one that's sung or said virtually every time a church is opened or consecrated and I'm sure it was here. And that's always been so. You see, the psalms were the hymn book of the Jewish religion. Jesus was brought up to read the Scriptures and to sing the psalms. This psalm was often sung as they walked up the hill to the temple; it was a love song to God: *How lovely is your dwelling place, Lord God of power and might.* And they went on: *Truly one day in your courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.* They loved God and they loved his house. And so they sang songs about it; this was one.

Take one of today's hymns: *We love the place, O God*. This hymn takes us on a tour of the church and reminds us of its purpose and significance.

Or take today's first hymn: *Holy, holy, holy, Lord God almighty*. It is based on Isaiah's vision of God in the temple. I think that it's one of those hymns that captures that sense of holiness, of majesty and awe, of stillness, of being caught up in the presence of God. This is not a matey sort of God, a big brother or a best friend, this is God and we had better take notice!

Our first reading was from the **1st Book of Kings**. A famous passage. Israel is at one of the strongest points in its history. It had built a great temple in Jerusalem. What we have here is King Solomon's prayer as he stands before the altar of the Lord in this new temple. He says to God: you are so great; there's no god like you anywhere in heaven or on earth. We have built this temple, this house of God, but nothing can contain you, not even heaven, let alone this temple. But please listen to the prayers of your people and the prayers of me, your servant.

If that passage was written in a time of success and prosperity then the next one from **1st Letter of St. Peter** is different. It was written in a time of great weakness, of persecution. Peter's readers were members of a minority community of which the authorities were suspicious. There's much talk here of firm foundations, of corner stones, of the builders. Think for a moment about what a corner stone is. In fact, it's the first stone set in the construction of a masonry foundation. It's important because all the other stones are set in reference to it. It determines the position of the entire structure. And so it was from this that there developed the idea of a foundation stone set in a

prominent location on the outside of a building. It often carried an inscription indicating the construction dates of the building and the names of the architect, builder and other significant individuals.

But in fact the church is not just a building. The real cornerstone is not built of these physical materials. The church is people and these people are called to be God's people, people through whom he can do his work on earth. It's a living stone, one that was rejected and yet chosen by God. The real cornerstone is Jesus Christ. That's why we sing *The Church's one foundation*. It's based on this passage:

*The church's one foundation is Jesus Christ her Lord;
she is his new creation by water and the word.*

And you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation. Once you were not a people at all, but now you are God's people.

Mark 2 is read on Palm Sunday. Jesus cleanses the temple. An angry Jesus; he's offended by the sacrilege, the distorted use to which the temple has been put. It had become a market place. And so he throws them out, upturns their tables, tosses their coins aside. It must have been quite a scene; sheep and cattle stampeding, doves flying everywhere. Now it's important to keep in mind that some of this commercial activity was OK. There was a need for people to be able to change their currency and the sacrificial system depended on the availability of animals. What Jesus was railing against was not this activity, but the way in which it had taken over the whole life of the Temple. They had lost their sense of purpose.

I've referred to all of today's hymns – except for one. And that will be the last one we will sing: *Let all the world in every corner sing, My God and king!*

Written by George Herbert, the quintessential Anglican priest and poet in the 1600s, although to be honest he wasn't rector of his parish for long. He died while quite young. And so it's somewhat surprising that in our lectionary we remember him each year in our calendar along with all saintly parish priests. But his poetry lives on. He lives on too in the way in which he provided a model of what Anglican ministry should look like, at least in his day. This is a very Anglican hymn. It links worship with daily life and work; prayer with practical activity. Let's look very quickly at the words (47).

Generally speaking, Anglicans love their churches in a way we don't so easily see in other traditions. We treat our church with respect. We acknowledge the altar, we kneel in silence when we first arrive, we deck the church with flowers, some of our churches have lovely windows. We keep it clean and tidy. St. Paul uses a phrase that Anglicans have picked up and run with: everything should be done *decently and in order*. Now I think that in more recent times we've let things slip a bit. Maybe a healthy concern for informality, approachability, shunning stuffiness and for emphasising relationships within the Church has come at a cost. Maybe we've lost the idea that we do things, build things, for the glory of God?

There's always been a tradition that Anglicans not only worship, but they go out to serve their community. George Herbert would approve. This place is full of people who do just that. Such people are an inspiration.

We have this church with all its imperfections and there are some. But it is nevertheless a house of God; **the** house of God for you. I just wish more of our people would use it and use it more often.

The other day here we celebrated Michaelmas, St. Michael and All Angels. A day when we can put logic and reason aside and put the imagination to work. Is it the left brain or the right brain – I've forgotten which. Angels, for most of us, come with wings and cherubic faces and that blinds us from the reality that an angel is a messenger of God – that's what the word *angelos* means. And maybe the messenger we meet is in fact a human being; someone sent by God to convey a message. Have you met an angel like that? Someone through whom God spoke to you?

Anyway, the OT lesson that day (Gen. 28) was the story of Jacob. Jacob was on his way. It was getting dark. So he stopped for the night. He rested his head on a stone and soon he fell asleep. It was what one writer calls 'A Night in the Hard Rock Motel'! Certainly for Jacob he was between a rock and a hard place! He had a dream and that dream was of a ladder on which angels were going up and coming down. And God spoke to him and said:

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go and I will bring you back to this land, for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.

And then Jacob awoke from his sleep and said:

Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it! How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God and this is the gate of heaven!

Does *this* church remind you of heaven? I hope it does. The Eucharist is the foretaste of heaven, the first fruits, a sneak preview. The people we meet with here foreshadow those we will meet in heaven.

Maybe this Dedication Festival will call you back to consider what this place is for. Maybe you should pray that you might be surprised, as Jacob was. Maybe you too will exclaim: *Surely the Lord is in this place – and I did not know it!*