

4th Sunday of Easter, Matins

Ezra 3:1-13 and Ephesians 2:11-end

Mother Alice

On January 26th of this year, a fire tore through the Church of St Mark, Hamilton Terrace, only a few miles away in St John's Wood. To see a place of worship utterly destroyed is profoundly shocking. As I saw images of the Church on fire I was reminded of the images of St Paul's Cathedral rising majestically and defiantly from the smoke amidst the scenes of the blitz in the second world war. Alas for St Mark's, the church is totally destroyed, and the cause of the fire may never be known. The task of rebuilding lies ahead, and we hold Mother Kate Harrison and her congregation in our prayers at this time as they make provision to worship elsewhere and discern how and when rebuilding will be possible.

The Christian Church has become a people who require a physical space for worship which by its stature and longevity speaks to us of God's presence through the generations. But our readings this morning challenge us to reflect on the position within our spirituality that these buildings hold. We are confronted with the reality of the people of Israel whose Temple has been destroyed, and who have returned to Jerusalem from exile and are beginning to rebuild. We are also challenged to think about the concept of the spiritual Temple that God knits together quite apart from any physical building. As we do so, I wonder: has the building become the object of our worship rather than God himself? And what consideration in our lives do we give to the belief that Christ's presence dwells spiritually in our bodies and in our collective gathering?

The starting place for all of these reflections on the physical and the spiritual sense of 'temple' is of course that question of where we believe God dwells. For the people of Israel, the dwelling place of Yahweh was a very physical, particular place, and that place became the place where worship was centred, where their whole lives became oriented. God of course appeared in distinctive physical places like the Burning Bush, but it was during the Exodus, and journey to the promised land, where we first see evidence of the tent of meeting – a particular place of deep spiritual significance to this nomadic people. In the tent of meeting was the ark of the covenant, a box containing the stone tablets upon which the 10 commandments were written, and it was believed that the presence of God dwelt within this ark, and it was carried with them from place to place. As time went on, the power of the presence of God within the ark became known throughout all the kingdoms of the ancient near east, and even mighty dynasties came to fear it. After it was briefly captured by the philistines it caused such death and destruction that it was returned.

As the people of Israel became a more settled people the tent of meeting was replaced by more permanent structures, until, under the reign of Solomon, the Temple in Jerusalem began to be built. This 'First Temple', Solomon's Temple, a structure and complex costing approximately 5 billion pounds, was the most important place in the whole of Israel, but when Jerusalem was captured by the King of Babylon, King Nebuchadnezzar in 586BC, it was utterly destroyed, and the people of Israel were taken into captivity in Babylon, a period known as the exile. Our reading from Ezra comes from the time where the first few Israelites begin to return to Jerusalem following the time of exile, and in scenes reminiscent of their ancestors reaching the promised land after the Exodus, begin the task of building and rebuilding – physically and spiritually.

It is deeply significant that their first desire is rebuild an altar, the place of sacrifice and worship. It reflects an attitude of both penance, for the sins which led to their time in exile, humility, recognising their need of God, and joy, a true desire to worship and give thanks for the possibility of the return.

The 7th month which Ezra refers to was the most important month of the Jewish calendar, because in it they celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles, the festival remembering their ancestors being brought through the red sea to freedom in the promised land, and so to be able to do this back in Jerusalem, setting up physical tents around this newly constructed altar amidst the ruins of the Temple, would have been profound and once again they celebrated the deliverance of Yahweh. Ezra also tells us that the returned Israelites were committed to rebuilding the Temple with the same high quality materials as before – employing tradesmen to use Cedar from Lebanon. But there is a juxtaposition between the shouts of joy as the young men, excited to build the altar, establish worship, take on the task of rebuilding – and the old men, weeping, remembering the destruction of the First Temple, knowing that this Second Temple would never be able to replace its status and design.

Nevertheless, the returned exiles prioritise above all else the reestablishment of worship, and worship in a physical place – and beginning with the building of the altar, and then around it the Temple, we can see that hope for the future flows out of this worship of Yahweh, by a gathered people, in a gathered place.

Of course this Second Temple that was built, was the Temple that Jesus knew, and the Temple that he spoke about. This Temple was destroyed in AD 70 by the Romans, and this awful time may be what Jesus is prophesying about when he speaks of the ‘abominable desolation’. But when he speaks of the destruction of the Temple, although what he says is not understood, he is actually referring to his forthcoming death and resurrection. Jesus is not understood, because in the whole spiritual psyche of the people of Israel, God and the Temple are inextricably bound, there is no other way of understanding where God dwells, where worship must take place. It cannot be overemphasised just how the entire lives of the people of God revolved around this building.

But there is an extreme tension at play. Because who Jesus is and what he says seems to challenge these FOUNDATIONS of faith, foundations in a very physical sense. The first Christians were something of a nomadic group – travelling around, preaching the good news, hiding also from those who sought to persecute this new and virulent sect. And the Greek ‘Ekklesia’ from which we now have the word ‘Church’ means – the called out ones, the assembly. There is a sense of the Church as a gathered people but never in the very early days as a building. Historically we have a situation where the Christians have no place of worship, and post AD70 neither do the Jews, and yet ultimately both seek to build places of worship.

And so I wonder if in some way we have got it very wrong – that the focus we have now on the Church as a building rather than as a gathered people of God means that we are neglecting the ways in which God’s Spirit lives and breathes through our souls and bodies, through our interactions, our decisions, our action in our communities together. I wonder if Paul’s letter to the Ephesians, which we heard today, and Jesus’ teachings about the body require more careful attention. It is unthinkable that our church building might be destroyed, but maybe one day it will, and maybe what matters when all has fallen away, is the health of the Church – the gathered people of God.

So St Paul’s encouragement to us is important. He speaks of the former ways, of the times of being ‘aliens and strangers’, of ‘having no hope’, but of now being ‘reconciled in Christ’. Paul’s language of construction seems very clear that the ‘dividing wall’ that Christ has broken down, and the ‘cornerstone’ that Christ himself is, that vital piece holding together this building that God is making, is not a physical place but a spiritual one. But the most challenging statement is that WE are being built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God. We are where God is please to dwell. Us – our bodies and souls. Us – our fellowship with one another. This physical building is

helpful as place to gather that is warm and dry and beautiful, but it is not the Temple of God and the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit. This is the Temple that endures for all eternity, that can never be destroyed.

We live therefore with a tension – because like our ancestors in the faith we have desired a physical place of worship, we have invested in that, these building are important to us as they were our ancestors. Here at St Mary Abbots we are surrounded literally by a cloud of witnesses of those who have gone before us in the faith and worshipped in this place. But let us not forget that, as Jesus said, ‘store not up for yourselves treasures upon the earth, where moth and rust doth destroy, and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven’. Let us remember that we are the body of Christ, the Temple of the Holy Spirit. And, like the words of the hymn, pray:

Come down, O Love divine,
seek thou this soul of mine,
and visit it with thine own ardor glowing;
O Comforter, draw near,
within my heart appear,
and kindle it, thy holy flame bestowing.

O let it freely burn,
till earthly passions turn
to dust and ashes in its heat consuming;
and let thy glorious light
shine ever on my sight,
and clothe me round, the while my path illuming.

And so the yearning strong,
with which the soul will long,
shall far outpass the power of human telling;
for none can guess its grace,
till Love create a place
wherein the Holy Spirit makes a dwelling.

Amen