

Dedication Festival 2020

I was glad when they said unto me: we will go into the house of the Lord.

Perhaps, like me, you know that best to the music of Hubert Parry. It is sung at coronations and, despite my not being quite in the same bracket as Her Majesty, at my institution as vicar here by the former Bishop of Ely all those years ago. I was glad to come here; I'm still glad to be here. I missed being in this ancient house of prayer during the lockdown, though to be honest it has taken awhile to get used to being back again. It has felt strangely barren, unprayed in, as though like in the vision of the prophet Ezekiel of the temple, the glory had somehow lifted up and departed for a while. And I knew coming back would be difficult with all the face masks and the social distancing and the lack of singing and the perpetual handwashing. It didn't help that we had the building works and the barrier here and an element of mess, chaos beyond and in the north aisle. That made me not so glad.

The first writers and hearers of our Old Testament reading weren't so glad either. Their retelling of the story of the building and dedication of their glorious temple was written when they had experienced its destruction and devastation and had been carted off into a strange land – a land incidentally where they couldn't sing the Lord's song, not by law but because of grief.

By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down, yea, we wept, when we remembered Zion... How shall we sing the Lord's song in a strange land?

Cut off from their house of prayer they did not cease to pray, but developed habits of praying at the time of the old morning and evening sacrifice and at noonday, praying through open windows towards Jerusalem, just as Muslims today pray towards Mecca. So Solomon while dedicating the temple and before the altar recognises that God is bigger than the Temple, and though sometimes God is pictured as dwelling in the Temple, it being God's house, Solomon recognises that even heaven cannot contain God, let alone one building on earth – and that wherever someone prays they may be heard by the ears of one not confined in space. So he prays:

Hear the plea of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place.

So the outer court of the Temple as it were reached out across the lands and seas. A bit like us in our exile from this place during the lockdown who learnt to sing the Lord's song in the strange land of our bedrooms – and some of you are still in exile and join us over the ether, though this time it is those in exile who are able to sing whilst those in the house of God must bite their tongues bar the few of the choir.

The destroyed Temple towards which they prayed was rebuilt, just as we've had our building project, and in time their hearts were glad again as once again they could go up to the house of the Lord and stand within its gates.

On Friday evening I came to lock up the church and stayed and sat and knelt in the chancel and prayed there again for the first time since March. I was glad, so glad. Especially glad as the chancel is not only back but also restored in a way not only recovering some of the glorious Victorian work – the tiles that have been scrubbed up and repaired but even better, for the replacement of what had been carpet for decades and before that a wooden floor with more tiles has livened up the acoustic is that one rather out of tune vicar can fill it with music that doesn't immediately make the angles put their hands over their ears – and today you heard something more akin to an angelic choir. Chancels were built to be sung in and to be places of celebrating the beauty of holiness. In the first churches built by the Celtic or Roman missionaries up and down the land were single cells, where the bands of missionary canons sang the Lord's song and followed in the tradition of the exiled Jews in keeping morning and evening and other hours of prayer, facing east, the rising sun in expectation of the resurrection of the dead. And the people came: what they heard and saw they wanted to be

part of, and they built their own extension to the church, the nave – and the nave has always been the people's part of the church, maintained by the people. It still is. The chancel was and is the responsibility of the rector on behalf of the clergy and it is still is – hence our lay rectors, Trinity College, have paid for all the lovely new and renewed tiling in the chancel, God bless them.

The first pray-ers in this chancel about 770 years ago were probably a vicar and some chaplains and a rector, a canon from Vercelli. They filled it with song and smoke and prayers and the beautiful presence of Christ as they celebrated the Eucharist and adored the One who made himself known in the breaking of the bread. That beautiful, holy presence has sustained the faithful of Chesterton down the centuries and has been for them on a rather miniature scale something like what the Temple was to those Jewish pilgrims of over 2.5 thousand years ago who no doubt sang their psalm of approach with especial joy when their beloved temple was rebuilt and restored and its gates open again for prayer and worship. There was a time in English history when the churches were shut by order and worship ceased. It was during what is called the interdict in the reign on King John and that lasted not in months but years. But that was before this building was here. Never have the gates of this house of prayer been shut for more than six days in the 770 years or so of its existence. What we have experienced this year has been a spiritual exile – where we have discovered of course that the Lord has not left us and as we have virtually gathered in his name he has been with us. But I for one am glad, so glad that at least some of us now are able to go into the house of the Lord. May peace be within thy walls now and for years to come. Amen.