

Dedication Festival 2026

So today we mark the 47th anniversary of the dedication of our beautiful church. The first dedication festival since our beautiful new roof, hopefully the last with big dirty handprints on our ceiling! It's an important day in which we give thanks for all that has been and look forward to all that is to come. A day which allows us to reflect on this place and our part in it.



As is often the case on this dedication Sunday, the lectionary writers have very helpfully given us readings full of Temples. In our Old Testament reading we hear Solomon praying at the dedication of his Temple. It's the very first Temple in Jerusalem, built in the mid 900's BC. Now no-one knows exactly what it looked like, but the Bible gives a pretty accurate description. It would have been a bustling, busy noisy place, full of people and animals. It was the place of God's presence, the centre of religious life.

In our Gospel reading we fast forward almost a thousand years. Jesus is also in the Jerusalem Temple, but not the same one. The original was destroyed by the Babylonians in the 6th century BC. When the people returned from exile they built another. Herod the Great then expanded it. It was finally finished only about 20 years before Jesus was born. This was the place Jesus gave his parents the slip when he was 12, the place he would have visited every year for Jewish festivals, the place he often taught his followers. And, of course, in today's Gospel, it's the place he causes havoc, overturning tables.

Today's Gospel is a pretty well-known story. Theologians have argued about what it means, churches have agonised about what it means - Are we allowed to have a merch stall, or charge for candles, or hold a fair? But, actually on this Dedication Sunday, I think this story addresses a much broader question. 2000 years later, what does Jesus want this Temple to look like, to be like?



When Jesus upends the tables, it's both a physical and spiritual turning over. Jesus quite literally overturns the old order. He brings in a whole new understanding of worship - Who can encounter God? How? Where? He literally throws it all up in the air. So let's look at the Gospel bit by bit and see what it might say to us.

I think the turning over of the tables isn't so much about 'merch in church', it's much deeper than that. In Jesus' day, people visiting the temple had become a commodity, a source of income, profit. We might think that has nothing to do with the church today, but actually, I feel that temptation very strongly. As a church we are judged by the diocese on 2 main things: Church growth and Church

finances. Every year, we submit figures which rate our 'performance.' There's always the risk then that, in these financially strapped times, we see new people as a new source of income or as bum on seat to prove our worth. Jesus overturning the tables reminds us that this must be a place where people are never used as a means to an end. They are valued simply for who they are, not what they bring. A place where people receive genuine welcome.

Secondly, Jesus' church is a place which opens its doors to all. We read that the blind and the lame came to Jesus in the Temple. These were unclean people, outcasts. It was outrageous and we're called to be outrageous too. Many of you will know that last weekend I was at Greenbelt Festival, the most inclusive, radical, out there Christian festival there is - I always feel very boring! It's a place of radical welcome, all abilities, sexualities, genders, are truly welcome. And yet, there are still people missing. Looking around, relatively few Greenbelters are from ethnic minorities and it's so middle class! It's amazing how it can be so radical and yet so home counties at the same time!

We are a really welcoming church, but if we're to offer Jesus' radical welcome, we must always be asking 'Who is missing from our church family?'

Thirdly, in today's Gospel, we also discover that Jesus' Church is a place of joy! The children are crying out in the temple - 'Hosanna'!! It's a cacophony! I think this is an interesting one, because in today's reading from Hebrews, we're reminded that here we worship an Almighty God, we're surrounded by angels. A couple of verses later it says, 'Worship God acceptably, with reverence and awe' (Hebrews 12:28). Now, we're very good at reverence and awe in the Anglo-Catholic tradition. We have candles, incense, bells and beautiful music. It all adds to that sense of awe and wonder. But does that mean we must be sober and serious? Very soon after I arrived here, I noticed a small framed notice on the back wall. It said, 'The reserved sacrament is kept here, Please be quiet.' We see it quite often during school visits too. The children, full of enthusiasm come piling in, with teachers urgently shushing them! 'Shh, you're in church!' Is that what



church needs to be? Jesus with his crowd of children clearly didn't think so - I'm with him. As soon as Covid lock-down happened, I snuck in and took the notice down. 'No-one will notice' I thought. Trouble was, because the walls were so sooty with incense, it left a big square patch. So I then had to wash the whole wall down to cover my tracks!

I think worship can be full of awe and reverence and also full of joy. I don't think St Stephen's will ever be a place where there's clapping or arm waving, but, at the heart of who we are, at the heart of all we do should be a deep sense of joy, a joy that spills over to those around us. When I worshipped at the Cathedral, I

used to love their motto, 'Inservi Deo et Laetare', which means 'Serve God and be Joyful!' Jesus spent his life eating, drinking, enjoying the company of friends, he loved and welcomed children, I'm sure he loves it when we, his Church, do the same.

The next thing we learn from today's Gospel, is that Jesus' church is also a place of challenge. Jesus teaching and actions were outrageous to the religious authorities and 2000 years later, they're still pretty outrageous. At church we should find belonging, healing, acceptance, food for our soul, but, we should also find ourselves challenged. Church isn't simply a comfy place to while away an hour on a Sunday morning, we should sometimes find ourselves, disturbed, moved, unsettled, needing to chew something over, to reflect. As a rule of thumb, if the Jesus we meet on a Sunday morning, agrees with everything we think – then it's probably not Jesus!

Finally, and above all, Jesus' church is a place of encounter with God. In today's Gospel reading, God is present in the Temple in a whole new way. In Jesus, God is physically present among the people mingling, chatting, healing. Thanks to Jesus, there are no longer any barriers to God. God is accessible to all. Here in this place, we encounter God in worship, in word and in sacrament in the bread and wine. This is the place we receive God's love, his forgiveness, his healing. But most radically of all, it is also here that we encounter God in each other. We are God's temple, God lives in us and lives through us. It is in us that people encounter God, in here but also out there. It's through us that God does his work. Through our hands and feet, our mouths, our lives, God is at work in the world.

So today as we give thanks to God for the dedication of this beautiful place, let's dedicate ourselves afresh to being a place of genuine and radical welcome, a place of joy, a place of challenge and a place of encounter. And as living Temples, may everything we are, everything we do, everything we think and say bring praise and glory to God. Amen.

Rev'd Ros Wilshire