

## **Dedication Festival**

St Mary and St Nicholas, Wilton 2022

*2 Chronicles 7: 11 – 16*

*John 4: 19 – 29*

May the words of my lips and the meditations of all of our hearts be now and always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer. Amen.

The Bible has an uneasy relationship with buildings. And indeed with places in general. Throughout Scripture we find accounts of particular places being holy: think about right at the beginning in Genesis, when Jacob has his vision of the ladder connecting heaven and earth, and he says, “truly the Lord is in this place and I did not know it. This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.” Or think about Moses being instructed to take off his sandals because the place on which he was standing ‘is holy ground’.

And our first lesson this evening, on this Dedication Festival, was from a much longer section of Chronicles which describes the completion of the Temple. Solomon takes up the work from his father David, and it is he who is charged to build this extraordinary building in which the God of Israel will be worshipped, and you can flick through the pages of Kings and Chronicles and learn about the precise materials that we used, the precise dimensions that were specified. Not probably very different from the technical specification that the builders of this house of worship must have been working from between 1841 and 1844, as this extraordinary and utterly distinctive church took shape here in the midst of Wilton.

But elsewhere buildings get less good press. Bible sometimes appears to be ambivalent about holy places, and is occasionally explicitly negative about them. The second lesson today is a case in point: should we be worshipping God on the mountain, as the Samaritans have done? Should we be worshipping God in Jerusalem, as the Israelites have done? Well actually, neither of those options are going to last, Jesus states.

One of the more extraordinary things that I used to do when I was Precentor of Salisbury Cathedral was to sit in on disaster mitigation meetings. We would, and presumably they still do, have a plan of what we would do if the worst happened. If the spire fell down, or the Cathedral caught fire, or was the victim of a terrorist attack. And of course, as the person responsible for the prayer and worship of the community, my voice was sometimes saying something a little different from other peoples. Of course it would be utterly devastating to lose the Cathedral. As indeed it would be utterly devastating to lose this church. But I was quite clear, and I hope you are too, that what you would do the next day is say your prayers anyway. Somewhere else. We saw exactly this happening when Notre Dame burned in Holy Week 2019. The next day the community met somewhere else, and said morning prayer and celebrated the Eucharist. As they would have done anyway. Because the community endures.

A member of Chapter during my time at the Cathedral was Ceri Hurford Jones, who at the time was managing director of Spire FM. He used to joke that if the cathedral burnt down his disaster mitigation plan was to immediately rename his radio station ‘Smoking Crater FM’.

I think we find the heart of the theme of Dedication Festival in the closing lines of the second lesson this evening. The

Samaritan woman at the well has this extraordinary encounter with Christ, which clearly transforms her. Something is very different at the end of this conversation. So much so that she leaves the water jar on the floor - she actually discards the purpose for which she had come to the well - and rushes back into town. And from a conversation about place: 'should we be worshipping here on our mountain, or over there in Jerusalem?', notice what changes.

"Come and see a man who told me everything I have ever done! He cannot be the Messiah, can he?" "Come and see a man."

It is the person and nature of Christ that transforms the woman at the well. And it is the person and nature of Christ that transforms us too.

The benefactors of this wonderful building knew that. There is so much that is beautiful and extraordinary about the Romanesque style, and I could preach a thousand sermons about a thousand important pieces of imagery in this building. Just raise your eyes to the great apse behind me. What do we find the highest and central point in this building? A man. "Come and see a man... He cannot be the Messiah can he?"

As our eye drifts upwards at the East End (which of course is actually the south-west end in this building), there are Saints in their little semi-circular arches, then a row of angels, then windows, then more angels, and then at the very top, at the summit and pinnacle of all of that Christian living and angelic adoration, Christ the King. And images of that sort, often referred to as *Christ Pantokrator*, are common in buildings of this design. It literally means 'Christ, ruler of all, or strength of all'.

The benefactors and architects of this building knew exactly what they were doing when they put that image there. We are to remember, every time we look to the liturgical East, every time we say the creed or celebrate Holy Communion, that there is a man at the heart of our faith. Not a building, or a place, or a philosophical idea, or a set of precepts. A man.

"Come and see a man. He cannot be the Messiah, can he?"

And, like thousands of millions of souls before us, we come stealing towards that man. Bearing what we can to offer him: like St Mary of Wilton on the left-hand side of the apse, offering this building as an act of homage to that man... or St Nicholas with his sailing ship, reminding us of his particular patronage of sailors. Like Mary and Nicholas, we come to this man, bringing what we can to offer: our lives, our hearts, our ministries, our care of this holy place.

These are all acts of dedication, and we sum them up on a day like this when we give thanks for those who gave this church to its community. In thanksgiving for the generosity and vision of those in the past, in prayer for those who hold and nurture and form this community today, and in anticipation of the good gifts that are lavished upon us by the one to whom all our prayer and worship is directed - we take our place in the apse, either side of Christ our King, offering to him our particular gifts not just on this dedication day, but in all times and in all places.

Amen.