

THE DEDICATION OF THE CHURCH – YEAR A (2026)

When we celebrate the anniversary of the dedication of a church building, we are doing something more than honouring bricks and mortar, sculpture and stone: there is a certain sort of Christian who insists that church buildings don't matter – that they're merely convenient boxes in which God's people may gather for worship, and that are warm and waterproof if you're lucky; but this anaemic and utilitarian view fails to do the church building justice, just as much as it neglects the human need for sacred space, and repudiates the theology of place, both of which are grounded in the fundamental Christian doctrine of the Incarnation – that the Word became flesh and dwelt, or tabernacled, among us; and thus dignified and sanctified above its created glory all life on earth.

The Christian understanding of God's dwelling among his people finds its antecedent in the life of the people of Israel, as God's presence dwelt first in the Ark of the Covenant, during the wilderness years; and, latterly, in the Holy of Holies of the Temple in Jerusalem, which was filled with the *Shekinah*, the glory of God. This indwelling presence not only made the Temple itself holy, but it also consecrated the people who worshipped there – so close were they to the source of all sanctity, that the sacred nature of the Temple became the Chosen People's identifying marker, and the definition of their corporate character. And S. John the Divine understood this: for, writing his Revelation, he looked to that future when God's presence would not only be located in one place and for one

people; but to that time when the glory of God would flood the whole earth, so that nothing might be outside the orbit of his divine presence, light and life. This new Jerusalem, the place in which heaven and earth will meet as they did in the Temple of old, is to be the destiny of all the redeemed people of God, no longer separated by time, tribe or language, but untied in and through the redemptive work of the incarnate Son of God, whose dwelling among his people made the Jerusalem Temple obsolete, and is the anticipation of life as it shall be in the new heaven and the new earth.

But between the Ascension of the Incarnate Presence and that time when we shall attain the eternal glory for which we were made, God has not abandoned us: at the Last Supper, Jesus left us not only the Church's supreme act of worship and Communion with God, but also the means by which he would fulfil his promise to be present in and with his Church until the end of time. In the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar, the crucified, risen and ascended Christ is really present – as present as he was to Zacchaeus, and all whom he encountered in his earthly ministry. It is in his sacramental presence that God continues to dwell among his people today, and the reservation of the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle is the locus of God's dwelling in every church building in which It resides. This is why church buildings are important, and why we give them due honour: because they are spaces hallowed by the presence of God himself, which both stand as physical witnesses to the unseen and the eternal; but which also

act as communicators of divine grace through the Sacrament which sanctifies them, and as crucibles for the human quest for the divine, as their walls are imbued with the hopes and fears, the joy and pain of the holy, pilgrim people of God. The church building is, then, as even the atheist poet Philip Larkin admitted, 'A serious house on serious earth'; and, as T. S. Eliot, a fervent Anglo-Catholic poet, cautioned those who might fail to treat church buildings with the seriousness which they deserve, 'You are not here to verify, / Instruct yourself, or inform curiosity, / Or carry report. You are here to kneel / Where prayer has been valid'. Here, the prayers of our forebears mingle with our own, intensifying the communion between, united as we are in the Body of Christ – that mystical entity which transcends time; and whose members have been, are, and will be nourished by the same Holy Communion which we will receive today. But, as sacred as the church building is, and as much as it undoubtedly consecrates the physical place and community in which it stands, to claim that our churches are the only place where God's presence dwells would be wrong. Because, as S. Paul teaches us, in his Epistle to the Ephesians, 'You also are being built together into a dwelling place for God by the Spirit'. God, whose Holy Spirit continues to make Jesus known and present in the Church and the world, is not only present to us under sacramental signs, but is present and active in the lives and hearts of his faithful people. The Holy Spirit, whom we first receive in baptism, and then through the other Sacraments of Holy Church, is the

indwelling presence of God within each of us – guiding us in the right path, opening our eyes to see Jesus present and at work in others, and sanctifying us, by conforming us daily to the likeness of Jesus, whom we recognise, worship and receive at the Altar of God.

And that we are unworthy and often broken tabernacles of God's glory and grace does not diminish the fact that he chooses to make his dwelling within us: of course, we are called to attend with care to our bodies and souls, to ensure that they are worthy of the God who dwells in our hearts by faith, and of his Son whose Body and Blood we receive, and carry out of the church building into the world; but we are also, like Zacchaeus, to recognise the dignity of the divine guest who dwells within, and who says to each us 'I must stay at your house today'. This word 'house' means both the deepest recess of our souls, and the 'House of God', this church building, of which we are temporarily the custodians and beneficiaries. God can, of course, dwell wherever he wills; but that he chooses to do so where he does should impel us to treat all his dwellings – human and monumental – with the utmost reverence and respect. And, as we celebrate the dedication of this church to be his dwelling-place in this parish, may we never forget that this house of prayer is also our home: the place of sanctuary and sanctification where we meet, and are fed in tokens of trust by, the risen Christ, who makes his home among us now, so that we might recognise and know him when he welcomes us into our true home in heaven. Amen.