

The temple is where God is

Sermon preached by Jessica Smith
at evensong with benediction on Dedication Festival Sunday 6th July 2014

"I was in Bristol on the night of the disaster. The following evening Fr Tomkinson had asked me to supper. I shall never forget the two of us standing in the smouldering ruin, the smell of burnt wood, the water, the devastation ... It seemed impossible that such a fate could have overtaken our beloved All Saints ... But as I look back I can see there was a lesson to be learnt. Perhaps we had become too dependent upon a building."

Those words, as I hope you will have realised, are not mine. They were spoken by the then Bishop of Southwark, Mervyn Stockwood during his sermon at Mass on the day of the dedication of the present building, July 1st 1967. Those words seem a little stark, harsh even, to recall 74 years after the destruction of the first parish church on this site and 46 years after the dedication of the rebuilt church. Taken too literally they could seem to point to some kind of "divine judgement", though I doubt that was the intention. The substance of Bishop Mervyn's sermon that day was to encourage his listeners not to look back to glory days but to look forward. In former days, All Saints had drawn crowds because it was one of the few parish churches at that time, certainly in this Diocese, which taught the full Catholic faith. By 1967 that was no longer true, partly owing to its pioneering work.

Cyril Tomkinson, the parish priest here in 1940, wrote in the Parish Magazine of January 1941, very soon after the blitz, *"There, down the road, is the wreck of the natural body of All Saints; but you, living and immortal souls, are the spiritual body of All Saints", and by the grace of God that spiritual body will stand.*" He spoke of 'down the road' from Emmanuel church in Guthrie Road, now a block of flats, which afforded the congregation here a refuge in which to worship in the immediate aftermath.

It seems that the congregations here, down the last 146 years, have needed reminding, prompting and refreshing about people as temple being more important than building as temple. Perhaps it is a caveat more needed in parishes of our tradition than others. We have, quite rightly, a very high regard here for our temple building and the liturgy which happens here. I remember asking Fr Kim earlier this year what first attracted him to All Saints as one from a somewhat different tradition in the Church of England, and he replied "a sense of the numinous in worship".

Fr George Bennett, in his farewell sermon at the end of his curacy in March 1982, quoted words we heard in the OT passage this evening when he said *"There is the danger, in a church where worship is the top priority, that overemphasis on the trappings of worship will lead to... ritualism. All Saints' will be great, not when it chants, "We are All Saints', Clifton, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord", but when it cries aloud, "Glory to Christ our Saviour." For all its glory, this beautiful church is just a piece of equipment for pilgrims, and the beauty of the liturgy just the merest shadow of the glory to come.*" Bold words again, no doubt borne of at least a modicum of experience of the 'ritualism' to which he referred.

By now you may have gathered that I have access to a collection of old parish magazines which I have mined over the last few days. For several years I trawled through them regularly to find passages from the relevant months which might resonate with, or even amuse, the current congregation. The exercise taught me a lot, principally "plus ça change plus c'est la même chose". We can get caught up in minutiae and we do often need reminding who we are - the body of Christ - and whom we serve.

However I'd like gently to make three counter-points - if I may term them thus - with different perspectives of time and status. The first is that I favour the simple definition that the temple is where God is, because it broadens our concept of temple beyond a building, beyond the people who worship there, beyond the worship itself. St Paul, in this evening's NT lesson, writes to the Church in Corinth, "*According to the grace of God given to me, like a skilled master builder I laid a foundation, and someone else is building on it. Each builder must choose with care how to build on it. For no one can lay any foundation other than the one that has been laid; that foundation is Jesus Christ.*" The other side of the not-dwelling-on-the-past coin is that there's also a danger of not heeding the past enough. We are indeed commissioned to proclaim the gospel afresh in every generation, and we should all take that seriously, not just those who preach. Our primary task is to cooperate with our loving God in the coming of his kingdom. But in doing so we cannot disregard those who staked their lives and reputations in founding and developing All Saints as a centre of Catholic worship. We have to work out what that might mean in each generation, and since we are poised for a new era with a new parish priest, it is all the more à propos. The temple is where God is - in a holy building, in holy relationships, in Christ himself as the incarnate God. You could say that it's about 'holy bodily insides.'

The second point pertains to the Blessed Sacrament. When the old All Saints' was destroyed, the Vicar wrote in his letter to the Parish Magazine the following month, "*The Blessed Sacrament was saved and most of the portable treasures.*" Notice the order in which he put those things. Someone, probably Fr Tomkinson himself, had considered the Sacrament was the most important retrieval to be made on that night. The temple within the temple? One of the most distinctive functions of the temple where we now are is that it houses the consecrated Body and Blood of our Lord Jesus Christ. In John 2, when Jesus drives out the market men from the temple in Jerusalem, he says "*Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up.*" John explains that he was speaking of the temple of his [risen] body. I do sometimes wonder whether we have lost some of the reverence and awe accorded to the Sacrament by the founders and forebears of All Saints.

That brings me to the third and final point, which is also a huge part of what All Saints has always embraced: the Communion of the Saints and the life everlasting. The departed remain very much a part of the body of Christ, another reason why we must not sweep away the past in the name of progress. Our foundation is Christ and the saints have been the builders in their generations. We must continue to build as carefully and humbly as they did.