

Chichester Cathedral Feast of Dedication

A sermon preached by Bishop Michael Langrish 7th October 2018

In the gospel we heard: '*Jesus was in the Temple, on the Festival of Dedication*' - rather as **we** are here today - and, St John tells us: "*It was winter.*" Maybe you don't often think of the Middle East as a wintry place, but it can be. I've been in Jerusalem in December and January and know how bitterly dank and cold it can be. The chill wind seems to seep into the bones. But it's not just the climate that we are being told+ about here. St John never uses words lightly. If he gives you a detail, it means something. So - be sure - he's not just reporting the Jerusalem weather in AD 31.

'Winter' - it can be a bleak and bitter time; and in an age where the only heat would come from a fire of sticks or a brazier, when clothes were expensive, and for poor people what they wore might be all that they had - then winter could mean numbness of your body, fingers and toes that had lost their feeling, unyielding hard and frozen ground in which it was impossible to harvest or plant; leafless trees and bare yards that showed no sign of life or growth.

Winter can be hard. And there are times when life can be hard too, both for individuals and societies - bleak, testing and something just to be stoically endured. In many parts of the world it feels like that now. Whether the chill winds that people are feeling are those of terrorism or war, economic instability or uncertainty about the future, the devastation of tsunami or disease; or the more personal issues of loneliness, illness or debt - you don't have to look far to find men, women and children suffering in their icy blast.

Where, then, in such circumstances are men and women to turn to find hope, and faith and love? Where else, but in a place of prayer and worship, a centre of teaching and nourishment, a base for practical help and pastoral care? A place such as this - a sanctuary, with God at its heart. So it should be **now**, so it should have been 2,000 years ago, in the time of Jesus. But then it wasn't. The place that should have provided these things was failing to do so; it was letting people down by not living up to what it was consecrated to be.

It seems to have been a wintry time for God's people then: a time of occupation and oppression, but also a wintry time in that faith had become formal, and lacking spiritual depth. Thus when John wrote '*It was winter*' it was a diagnosis of an interior

condition, a statement about the faith, or lack of it, in the community of those who had gathered in the Temple, in those wintry days.

Why were they there anyway? It was for the Festival of Dedication, something that ought to have rekindled their faith and been a source of hope. It was a Feast celebrated, quite deliberately, at the winter solstice, on the shortest day of the year, when it was not just wintry, but also dark, and as such it commemorated a time of deep coldness and darkness in the nation's life. That was BC 167. Jerusalem was under foreign occupation. The temple had been desecrated with pagan worship. It was no longer the place it had been dedicated to be. It was a time of gloom - a time which had seen loss of faith and loss of hope.

Then things changed. And Hanukkah, the Festival of Dedication, celebrated just that: the day that the temple was recovered for its proper use and rededicated to the one true God. For eight days the people remembered the rekindling of hope by putting eight lights in their windows – a custom still observed by Jews to day: lights shining in darkness, a flicker of warmth amid the chill.

The problem seems to have been, though, that this had become a token gesture – a celebratory display rather than a sign of what was really going on in lives and hearts. The re-dedication of the building, maybe; the dedication of hearts and mind, words and deeds, values and attitudes – well, maybe not. There seems to have been much, as always, suggesting still frozen hearts, in a lack of compassion and care for justice and truth. Despite the lights there was still evidence of blindness to suffering and need.

But it is in the face of such darkness and coldness that Christ is always to be found. *So, at the time of the festival of the Dedication . . . it was winter, and Jesus was in the temple.* There in the place dedicated and set aside for the worship of God was to be found the life formed by, dedicated to and set aside for the life of God – the life of truth and justice, of hope and healing, of grace and generosity, of faith and love. But could people see it, and if not why not?

St John tells us that the people gathered around Jesus complaining: *'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah – that is the one to save us and bring us hope - tell us plainly.'* It seems a reasonable request, but one has the feeling that this is not the real problem. We can, all of us, be told things and not hear them; we can be given the truth and not want to hear it – because it is too unsettling, demanding or something we just do not want to hear. As I read that gospel passage

I have a sad sense of a people not looking for real answers to difficult questions, but merely for panaceas. They seek words of easy comfort rather than a real understanding of the root cause of the cold chill that they feel, the real issue at stake. They look for easy options rather than the hard decisions that might be required to see things really changed around. It makes me think long and hard about what I really want to hear as I come to worship week by week, or what I am really looking for from politicians and public servants – national and local – as they gather in conference as so many of them are doing this month. Is it simply the longing for a word of bland re-assurance, or a readiness to hear awkward answers and face radical change?

It would seem that for those who were questioning Jesus, the answer was pretty clear: *Jesus answered them, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but you do not believe, because you do not belong.'* You don't want to be part of what I am really about.

The point is: they **have** been told plainly enough – and not just in what Jesus has said to them, but most of all in what has **done**, in the evidence of his life. Yet it was precisely this that they seemed unable to see. The real problem was a people who could not recognize, maybe had even ceased to expect, the signs of the eternal life of God that he is **always** offering in the here and now – in the changing of water into wine, in the feeding of the 5000, in the healing of the lame and sick, in the raising of Lazarus, in the commandment to love God and each other too – all signs of radical transformation. Even when the real source of hope, faith and love was standing in their midst, they could not see it, their hardened hearts couldn't hear Christ's words, understand his works, or recognize who he is.

And the sad truth is that as long as they (and we) fail to consecrate themselves (ourselves), their life and heart (our life and heart), and all that they – and we - are and have, they/we will go on standing there saying, plaintively *"Tell us plainly, are you the Messiah or are you just another intruder that needs to be thrown out of **our** temple?"*

"Tell us plainly" – these are the words of a frozen, wintry, people, who cannot – or so not want to - fully comprehend what it means to have the living Word of God in their midst because of the winter in their hearts: winter in their spirit; winter in their seeing and hearing; winter in believing and knowing. *"Tell us plainly"* is the cry of a people

who have become too complacent in their faith, dedicating only their temple building, and not the temple of their soul.

In a situation like this, Jesus' response is always the same. *"I have told you, and you just do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; but you do not believe because you do not belong to my sheep. My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me."*

If the **temple** is to be what it was consecrated to be, it requires the consecrated **lives** of those who make it their home. And that re-consecration, that re-dedication begins how? By hearing Jesus' voice, by listening to the one who knows us better than we know ourselves, that we might then move on from the desolation of winter as we more closely follow him

But just how do we hear the voice of Jesus? In all the many competing voices demanding our attention, and the cacophony of sound in today's world, how can you and I hear, and then recognize, a living word of God for the here and now?

The answer of Jesus is again quite clear: *My sheep hear **my** voice . . . and they follow **me***. So that voice is the voice of the one who washed his disciples' feet, one who healed the sick, who forgave sinners their sins, fed the hungry, sat with children, ate with tax collectors and sinners, and told his followers to love one another, and love your neighbour as you love yourself, for this is how you show your love for God. That's the voice of Jesus we are to hear and grow to know and love.

You want to hear the voice of God? - go read the Beatitudes: *"blessed are the poor, those who mourn, the meek, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake"*. Listen to Jesus' words: *love God, your neighbour, and your enemy; do not worry about your life or tomorrow; turn the other cheek; do not judge, sell your possessions and give to the poor; take up your cross; show mercy like the Good Samaritan; forgive seventy times seven; wash each others' feet; follow me*. We hear Jesus words in the integrity of what he taught and what he did and what he was. We trust Jesus' words because his actions are one with his person – loving, self-giving, truthful and just. *My sheep hear my voice . . .and they follow me."*

At the heart of a dedicated life is this constant desire to learn of and listen for him. And the place where you may most expect to learn to do this first and foremost is in God's house, a house of prayer, a place dedicated to his name, a place where the word of God is faithfully preached, and the love of God is lovingly practiced and

where the name of God is hopefully uplifted and praised. A place, on other words, such as this. But there is a virtuous circle here, a dedicated building requires a dedicated people, and a dedicated people need a dedicated place that lives up to its name and purpose to nourish and encourage them in their continually re-offered and re-dedicated lives.

Today's Feast of Dedication is not only about the memory of a relocation of a building from Selsey to Chichester nearly 950 years ago. It is far more than that. It is rather to find in this house of prayer, set aside for the worship of God and the service of his Kingdom an encouragement to us to rededicate **ourselves**, to set aside our whole lives, every day, to listen for the voice of God through the words of God's Son - whether these come through scripture, or in prayer, or in a neighbour's loving or challenging words or thoughtful deeds. The key thing is – to go on learning to listen for him. And however they come, we are to test the words we receive, with the criteria of love and mercy, justice and truth. And when we **do** hear the voice of God in a way that we can trust, it is then that we are we able to be a real source of encouragement to one another, supporting one another – in the dark and cold times, helping each other not to be afraid to follow, and even take a risk in seeking to do God's will, in these wintry times in which we may find ourselves now.

Several times during the period when I was Bishop of Exeter, I saw the people of the city flock into Exeter Cathedral unbidden, but drawn, it would seem, as if by some great magnet, something far bigger than themselves. They did it on the Millennium Eve. They did it throughout the day of 9/11 having seen those horrific pictures on their screens. They did it when a young suicide bomber, a radicalized convert to Islam was apprehended in a crowded restaurant nearby

On each occasion, and others like them, it was to their cathedral that they came, to that ancient place of prayer and proclamation that they came. Not just to an historic building. But rather to a place that had been dedicated and set aside for a people also dedicated and set aside for the listening for God's voice and having the courage to follow Jesus' call. They came to find hope, to a community of prayer, even if they didn't know how to pray themselves, and to find warmth in the chill of uncertainty or fear. That is what places like this are for – to be a light in winter, a place where the word of god is heard and applied.

Genesis 28.11-18

¹¹He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place. ¹²And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it. ¹³And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; ¹⁴and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring. ¹⁵Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.' ¹⁶Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place—and I did not know it!' ¹⁷And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

18 So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it.

1 Peter 2.1-10 The Living Stone and a Chosen People

2 Rid yourselves, therefore, of all malice, and all guile, insincerity, envy, and all slander. ²Like newborn infants, long for the pure, spiritual milk, so that by it you may grow into salvation— ³if indeed you have tasted that the Lord is good.

4 Come to him, a living stone, though rejected by mortals yet chosen and precious in God's sight, and ⁵like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ⁶For it stands in scripture:

'See, I am laying in Zion a stone,
a cornerstone chosen and precious;
and whoever believes in him will not be put to shame.'

⁷To you then who believe, he is precious; but for those who do not believe,

'The stone that the builders rejected
has become the very head of the corner',

⁸and

'A stone that makes them stumble,
and a rock that makes them fall.'

They stumble because they disobey the word, as they were destined to do.

9 But you are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

¹⁰ Once you were not a people,
but now you are God's people;
once you had not received mercy,
but now you have received mercy.

John 10.22-29 Jesus Is Rejected by the Jews

22 At that time the festival of the Dedication took place in Jerusalem. It was winter, ²³and Jesus was walking in the temple, in the portico of Solomon. ²⁴So the Jews gathered around him and said to him, 'How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Messiah, tell us plainly.'²⁵ Jesus answered, 'I have told you, and you do not believe. The works that I do in my Father's name testify to me; ²⁶but

you do not believe, because you do not belong to my sheep. ²⁷My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. ²⁸I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand. ²⁹What my Father has given me is greater than all else, and no one can snatch it out of the Father's hand.