

## Feast of Dedication, Mattins, 2019 (06.10.2019)

Today is the Cathedral's Feast of Dedication – the day we give thanks for the consecration of this building as a sacred place. And if that sounds rather rarefied then perhaps, we should reflect on the way in the last year sacred places have become a focus for good and evil; places of social, political as well as religious consequence. Whether it was the synagogue in Pittsburgh or the mosque in Christchurch, New Zealand the significance of these sacred places was such that they became the scenes of violent shootings. In a different way we heard at the end of August how hundreds of protestors in Australia tried to prevent trees, sacred to the aborigines, from being bulldozed and destroyed. And an Australian MP likened the feelings of what was happening to the shock in Paris when the Cathedral of Notre Dame caught fire. Even in a secular culture sacred spaces are invested with huge meaning for both good and ill.

And we find that a concern for place is also a feature of the gospels, something we see in today's second reading when Jesus was travelling through Jericho. For there in Jericho Jesus encounters Zacchaeus, the diminutive tax collector, and tells him: "I must stay at your house today." And when Jesus entered that house, that

particular space, a transformation took place. The home of Zacchaeus became the place where wrongs were made right; where injustice was changed into generosity for the poor; where the loneliness and isolation of a tax collector was changed into joy and reconciliation. And the word house in this passage doesn't just denote the physical space occupied by Zacchaeus and Jesus – it also refers to the household of Zacchaeus. So, when Jesus concludes by saying “today salvation has come to this house” it means that the same blessings of healing and wholeness received by Zacchaeus were also bestowed on his servants.

Luke, then, shows us how the house of Zacchaeus became a sacred space – not because there was anything intrinsically holy about the house itself but because of the presence of Jesus bringing life. And the same is true of this Cathedral Church as we celebrate our Feast of Dedication. A church is made sacred by the presence of Jesus – for where two or three gather to pray in his name Jesus has promised to be present; as we gather to hear his word we are encouraged to let him dwell in us richly; and as we celebrate the sacraments especially the Eucharist his healing, reconciling presence is made real for us. It is through all these things that Jesus comes among his people and so consecrates a building making it sacred. But,

although this Cathedral Church, like the house of Zacchaeus, is not intrinsically holy in itself, it does act as a catalyst, as a sort of spiritual text, leading us still closer to the presence of Christ. That's why a Church is not primarily a theatre for the performance of the liturgy nor a classroom for the teaching of the faith. It is a space in which the Christian community finds pointers and signs to the presence of God; a space to help them journey on towards the consummation of that divine relationship on the other side of death.

In the 12<sup>th</sup> century there was a famous Abbot of the monastery of St. Denis in Paris called Abbe Suger. In his writing he talked about the way a medieval church is really a sacred text for those with eyes to see. So, for instance this Cathedral Church, like so many medieval cathedrals, has three visible storeys inside the building consisting of a main arcade, the triforium level and finally clerestory at the top. And Abbot Suger pointed out the Trinitarian symbolism of this three-storey construction and the way it subliminally informs the heart and mind of the Christian who worships in this space and leads them onwards to a vision of God as Trinity in the heavenly places. This place, then, has been made sacred by the presence of Christ in word and sacrament; by the coming together of his Body the Church in

prayer and praise. And the hallowing of this place is reinforced by the way the building has been created as a spiritual text.

But I began with the painful, recent memories of shootings in synagogue and mosque. And that reminds us that it is possible for sacred spaces to be violated and not only by extreme acts of violence. If buildings like this are made sacred by the presence of Christ and are places where his abundant life is made manifest, then it means there is an ethical dimension to the way we use such sacred spaces. Quite obviously not every activity is freighted with the life of Jesus; not every action will open us to the presence of our Lord who alone consecrates this place. And that puts a huge responsibility not only on Chapter but on each one of us to recognize that actions and attitudes which are not Christlike cause dissonance in this space; whether it is greed, injustice, pride, divisions, gossip or hatred to name but a few.

So, may this Feast of Dedication be a time when we reflect on what we bring into this place. Are we being channels of the love and healing which are signs of the grace of Jesus? Are we adding to that sense of the sacred by acting as transmitters of the abundant life we long to receive in this lovely place?