

Chapter Mass Dedication of the Cathedral

Most of us will probably never experience the Dedication of a Cathedral. It is a rather rare event.

Hopefully, we won't be celebrating another one in the Diocese anytime soon!

We may well witness the Dedication of a church. In fact, there is one coming up soon when we will celebrate the joyful occasion of the dedication of the church in Tiverton.

The Rite of Dedication is a wonderful and beautiful ceremony, and it is rich in symbolism. It was so on 22nd September 1880, when this Cathedral was dedicated by Bishop Vaughan.

The ceremony was more elaborate then, but essentially it was doing the same thing as the Rite we would celebrate today.

In the ritual : the church doors are opened, water is sprinkled, the walls and the altar are anointed with chrism, relics are placed beneath the altar, incense is burned, the pillar of smoke rises towards the roof, candles are lit and, most significantly, Holy Mass is celebrated!

But what is interesting about today's readings is that, while we might naturally focus on the Cathedral building, the Word of God keeps taking us beyond the building itself.

In the first reading, Ezekiel has a vision of water flowing out from the Temple. It begins as a small stream, but it becomes a river, bringing life wherever it goes. The trees along its banks bear fruit and their leaves bring healing.

And that is a wonderful image for what a Cathedral is meant to be.

We gather here to worship God, to hear his Word and to celebrate the Eucharist. But what happens here is not intended to remain here.

Like the water flowing from the Temple, the life we receive here, is meant to flow out into the diocese and into the lives of God's people, and beyond.

Then St Peter gives us another image. He says that Christ is the living stone, and that we ourselves are "living stones", being built into a spiritual house.

A Cathedral is made of stones. They have been here for generations, and have witnessed countless Masses, baptisms, weddings and funerals.

But St Peter reminds us that the Church is made of living stones, the people who have gathered here, down through the generations, to worship God and to receive the sacraments. And, we are built upon Christ.

And Peter goes on to say. "You are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people for his own possession."

And he tells us why: "that you may proclaim the excellencies of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light."

That is a wonderful description of the Church. We are gathered here because God has called us, and we are called to proclaim what God has done for us

And that applies to all of us here today. We belong to Christ and to his Church* and each of us has a part to play in its life here and now.

But this is not just any church. It is the Cathedral, the mother church of the Diocese of Plymouth. It is the church of our Bishop, and the Chapter has a particular responsibility for its life and worship.

From here, in a particular way, we are reminded of our unity as one diocese, even though we gather week by week in many different parishes and communities.

In the Gospel, the Samaritan woman asks Jesus where people should worship. Is it on their mountain or in Jerusalem?

Jesus says: "The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth"

We rightly treasure our Churches and Cathedrals. They are sacred places, very often beautiful places. They hold the prayers and memories of generations. And this Cathedral has a particular place in the hearts of many of us.

We have gathered here for important moments in our lives, and in the life of the Diocese. We have prayed here, celebrated here, and have had times of sadness here, too.

Over the years, this place has become very familiar to us, and we have a genuine affection for it.

But God cannot be contained within any building.

And perhaps that helps us to understand why the ritual of dedication is so rich. The symbolic actions of the liturgy also speak to us, the living stones.

The church doors are opened, symbolising that Christ is the gateway to salvation, and that we are called to be a welcoming and hospitable people, open to all.

We are sprinkled with water. We are reminded of our baptism, when we were washed clean and welcomed into the life of Christ.

The altar and walls are anointed with chrism. We are reminded that we too have been anointed and called to belong to Christ.

Incense rises from the altar, reminding us of the prayers of the Church, rising before God.

And then the candles are lit, reminding us that Christ is the light of the world, and we are to be light to the world, and there are the relics. Perhaps some of us are the relics too!

So, on this feast we should not only ask, "What has this Cathedral been dedicated for?"

We might also ask, "What have we been dedicated for?"

The answer is clear: We have been called to worship God, to proclaim the Gospel, and to serve those in need.

We come here to worship and to receive the life of Christ. We then carry that life into the world by what we say, by how we live, and by the way we care for those who are poor, vulnerable or in need.

The Church's care for those who are in need belongs to the very nature of the Church. As Pope Benedict XVI reminded us, the Church's proclamation of the Word, celebration of the sacraments and service of charity belong together.

Perhaps that is what Ezekiel's river is saying to us. The water flows out from the Temple. It brings life and healing wherever it goes.

That is why the dedication reaches its climax not in the anointing of the altar or the lighting of the candles, but in the celebration of the Eucharist.

Everything leads to this altar.

Here Christ gives himself to us. Here we are fed by his Word and by his Body and Blood. Then we return to our parishes, our homes and our daily lives.

When this Cathedral was first dedicated, the liturgy would have looked rather different from the rite we celebrate today. But the essential thing would have been the same: God's people gathered around Christ, worshipping the Father.

One hundred and forty-six years later, we are gathered here for our time. Others came before us, and others will come after us.

But Christ remains, and his Church continues.

So today we give thanks for this Cathedral, for the faith of those who built it, for the generations who have worshipped here, and for all that God has done through this place.

The river in Ezekiel's vision did not stop at the Temple. It flowed out, bringing life and healing.

May something of the life we receive at this altar flow out, through us, into the diocese and the wider world.