

May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

So today we are celebrating this church's birthday – in a way it's a bit like the Queen, who has two birthdays: the official one and the actual one, we have our patronal festival and our dedication... And who doesn't like a party! People have gathered on special occasions for as long as we've been around, whether they be personal, like birthdays and anniversaries; the marking of significant occasions such as births, weddings and funerals; or a common purpose, in our case, here, to relate to God and to each other regularly. In the reading from Chronicles [which we've not read this morning] the leaders of the Ancestral Houses of Israel and Judah have come together to bring offerings to God, and David gives thanks to God for all the gifts they have given, which they in turn give to God by saying 'all things come from you... and of your own do we give you'. And even before building had started on Solomon's temple and before the incarnation of that temple in which Jesus finds himself in our gospel reading, people have gathered, and continue to gather to give thanks, to offer prayers and remember the stories of the faithfulness of God.

By the time we get to Paul and his letter to the Ephesians, the temple is still important to those who are following "The Way". Jerusalem became a point of meeting for the apostles as they began to spread themselves far and wide to share the Good News of salvation. And although the temple had been the central place where the Jews gathered for the key festivals, the numbers of those who followed Christ's way grew beyond the temple's capacity and lived too far away to travel. The apostles also reflected on their experience of Jesus when he was with them and their relationship with God after Jesus' ascension, and found their identity ultimately in that relationship, rather than a particular place (like the temple), especially when the temple was destroyed. As Paul wrote: 'we are no longer strangers/foreigners, but citizens with the saints and members of the household of God, built upon the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ as the cornerstone – in him the whole structure is joined together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord, in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling place for God.'

As we celebrate the dedication of this building, we are not only giving thanks for this space, this gift, but we also are reminded that it doesn't stop with these walls and ceilings (even if they are stunning). We celebrate together, we join together to give thanks, to pray and to remember the stories of God's faithfulness. We, every week, are being knitted together with the saints, including apostles and prophets which are depicted in the chancel and in the windows. We are members of the household of God, we are a dwelling place for God. We are, in a way, the temple, the church.

And so, Jesus in our Gospel reading is consumed with zeal for God's house, that dwelling place for God. In that moment, when he turns over the tables and rebukes those who have turned the temple into a marketplace, he is angry because the focus has been taken away from God, from giving thanks, praying together and remembering the stories – it has become a commodity, something to be bought and sold. But relationship with God and with our fellow members is too valuable, too precious to be belittled in such a way. It's no wonder that Jesus is angry. And he turns the tables again when the Jews ask him for a sign – he talks of the destruction of the temple as they know it, and its rebuilding in himself, a nod towards his death, resurrection and ascension. Because through Jesus, through his embodiment of giving thanks, prayer and remembering the stories of God's faithfulness, we come to know God for ourselves and know God with each other.

In a short while, we too will give thanks, pray, and remember the story of God's faithfulness around this table. We will see with our eyes and touch with our hands a sign of Jesus' life and love for us. And as today we give thanks for this place in which we gather, we also go out into the world around us – our everyday life and work; our friends, neighbours and those we come across on the way; the situations and circumstances we find ourselves in. The church is not just a place but the people within it, and it doesn't stop when we walk through the door onto the green. As members of the body of Christ, of the household of God, God dwells in us, as we dwell in the world. And so, let us give thanks, let us pray, let us remember the stories of God's faithfulness, so we may know God's dwelling in us as we live through this coming week. Amen.