



A sermon for the Dedication Festival Eucharist at Wells Cathedral, preached on Wednesday 7 October by the Reverend Dr Casey Strine, Secretary for Theology and Theological Adviser to the House of Bishops.

Wells Cathedral Dedication Festival

Readings: 1 Kings 8:22-30; Matthew 21:12-16

It will not have escaped an audience of your intellectual powers that both of our texts deal with the Jerusalem temple. The lectionary wants us to think about what it means for a place to be a house of God, one where the divine presence that is available to us in all places is encountered in an inexplicably magnified way.

In the past few weeks, I have been at Lichfield Cathedral, Gloucester Cathedral, and now here at Wells Cathedral. I have been aware that these are places where Christian people have been worshipping our Triune God for well over a thousand years. Being from the so-called 'New World', that reality may be more palpable for me than for others. My experience of these places is that they have an indescribable scent about them. That is not a veiled swipe at Precentors or Thurifers, as if they've purchased and employed questionable incense. No, it is an inadequate attempt to put into a single word the visceral, almost tangible, sense that the prayers of those people who have inhabited these places across more than a millennium have left an olfactory residue that one can sense, but not see or grasp or articulate.

What generates an atmosphere in which you can smell the presence of the faithful followers of God? I think our two texts might offer us some indication.

1 Kings 8 recounts the dedication of the Jerusalem Temple under the kingship of Solomon. You will recall that Solomon builds the Temple that his father David hoped to see, but never did. This foundational point should remind us that our faith is a generational one—always has been, always will be. David bequeaths to Solomon the task of building the Temple; Solomon inherits it, and in his dedication prayer speaks not of himself, but in verses 25-26 invokes those that he envisions God raising up to succeed him—not just in one generation, but in many.

This could not have been lost on Aldhelm and King Ine when they established an Abbey church here in 705. It could not have been lost on those who followed—and especially those who endeavoured to build this great building in the 12th and 13th centuries when it would obviously have been a multi-generational task. The existence of this place—like Lichfield and Gloucester—is a reflection of those who understood that our Christian faith is not something we possess, as if it were a trophy to put on a shelf, but we transmit, as if it were a baton we receive from one generation in a relay and pass on to another that will carry it on after we have finished our leg of the race.

But how does Solomon envision this will be possible? Like his father David, he knew that God's promise to preserve the people and bless them was intertwined with a call for them to demonstrate their faith in the living God through their lives. Just as David was one who kept the covenant with God by loving the Lord with all his heart and soul and strength—surely v. 23 has in mind the *Shema*, the central confession of Judaism—Solomon prays in v. 25 that these future generations will be children who walk before the Lord with a similar desire to demonstrate their love of God.

What is not contained in our reading today are vv. 31-53, which explore a range of scenarios exploring what this looks like. Solomon's examples operate as a succinct reminder of the whole of the *Torah*. We often translate that Hebrew word as law, but it is more appropriately and richly translated as instruction. *Torah* is not simply a list of rules to be followed, but it is a collection of cases and situations that illustrate good order in society, the collected wisdom of generations about what it means to wisely and faithfully embody in our relationships the call to reflect our love of God in our love of neighbour.

It will not be lost on this audience that King Ine, royal patron of this place, likewise promulgated a code of laws envisioning the love of God and the love of neighbour in his time. King Ine was also clear that his laws were the collected wisdom of Cenred, his father, and the bishops Hedde and Eorcenwold. As David followed in the footsteps of Moses, and Solomon in the footsteps of David, and later Hezekiah would follow in the footsteps of Solomon, so Cenred and Ine did too: they gave to their people the collected wisdom of what it meant to order society in a way that showed the love of God through the love of neighbour so that the Christian faith might be transmitted for generations. Not possessed, bequeathed.

And so, we turn to our Gospel reading, in which Jesus finds himself in the Temple of David and Solomon and Hezekiah. He is dismayed to find that the love of God is not manifesting in love of neighbour. Jesus calls out the people for their failure to do so—not, note, in his own words, but in the words of Isaiah (56:7) and Jeremiah (7:11). Matthew contrasts this perversion of the Temple with Jesus' healings—his miraculous acts that are exemplars of what it means to love God and neighbour with one's whole heart and soul and strength. The healings are

for the wholeness of those healed, but also the wholeness of the whole community, who are called back to a proper love of God and love of neighbour through them. Jesus exclaims this in the words of the Psalmist (8:2)—and in placing the message in the mouth of infants, Jesus underscores the trans-generational nature of the community of God's faithful.

Friends, as we worship today on a site where our ancestors in the faith have done so for 1300 years, let us feel both the immensity of our call to preserve this inheritance and the grand privilege it is to have this life-transforming faith to share with others.

May the immensity of this task, like an odour that fills a place and cannot be ignored, even rising to the point of feeling like a physical force, impress itself on us today. We stand in the presence of a holy God, called to an awesome task, for which we should feel inadequate. Let us pray for help in the words of our ordinal:

We cannot bear the weight of this calling in our own strength, but only by the grace and power of God. Pray therefore that your heart may daily be enlarged and your understanding of the Scriptures enlightened. Pray earnestly for the gift of the Holy Spirit.

May the privilege of our transforming faith, bequeathed to us and enhanced and enlarged as we bequeath it to future generations, like a sweet scent that lingers in one's hair and clothes and remains with one long after they leave a place, encourage us in our task to share with others the merciful, unconditional love of our God for us with others.

May this place, in this year of prayer for the Diocese of Bath and Wells, be a house of prayer. And, may the scent of our prayers, added to those of prior generations, increase the residue of God's faithfulness that people experience in this place.

The Reverend Dr Casey Strine

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