

Hymns: **167** “Colours of day dawn into the mind”
 154 “Come divine interpreter”
 693 “Beauty for brokenness”
 661 “Give me faith which can remove”

Readings: **Romans 5:1-11**
 John 2:12-25

“SACRED SPACE”

Two or three weeks ago, I was asked by a group of architects to lead a discussion on the subject of I’ve chosen as a title for this morning’s service. Sacred Space.

It was all about what architects consider to be supremely challenging. How do they build something, how do they provide a physical and structural envelope, how do they use concrete, wood, glass and steel, to encase an idea? Or an instinct? Or a prompting of the Spirit? Once you build walls and provide a roof, once you weatherproof a building, you run the risk of providing a tomb, a charnel house, for the breathing and vibrating, energising and inspiring idea or instinct or prompting of the spirit that was your starting point. As I say, a radical challenge even for experts.

And if architects run this risk, so too do theologians and Christian believers.

They too start with something that pulsates with life. Their story begins with a life-giving, vision, a heart-warming experience, an uplifting and ennobling surge of the spirit. It has its origins in a moment of deep realisation that our chains fall off, our heart is free, we can rise, go forth and follow the architect of the universe, the saviour of the world, the giver of life.

That’s how theology and church life begins. Alas! Only too soon we can find that the source of our understanding, our glimpses of heaven, have been capped. A complicated creed has been built over the spot, the moment, where we saw and felt and understood the meaning, the direction, the essence of all that speaks of life. Our musings become mausoleums. Our creeds cripple us. Our regulations introduce us to rigor mortis.

Where we might look for the living Christ, we find statues of him, gilded and ornate, which trap our eye and cramp our style. Our broad understanding of what makes the world go round, what gets our heart pumping faster, what bathes and clothes the world and our lives in all the colours of the rainbow, has been cropped and photo-shopped. It’s been robbed of its context. Or, as Shakespeare put it in his own incomparable way, the very life-force has been “cabined, cribbed, confined.”

Soon theological or populist constructs, abstract thinking or out-and-out superstition replaces the idea or the instinct or the spiritual prompting with which the journey began. Soon, our “orthodoxy” is measured by the creeds we recite, the buildings we worship in (or which we worship). The physical replaces the metaphysical, the material takes over from the spiritual.

Please don't think that all of this is mere fancy on the preacher's part. I have drawn these random thoughts directly from my consideration of the gospel passage we've been using this morning.

Jesus finds himself in the Temple in Jerusalem during the celebration of Passover. This is the greatest feast in the Jewish year. This is the time when the Jewish people remember the epochal and foundational moment in their history. This is the time when the Angel of Death “passed over” the houses of the Jewish people who were, at that time, living in slavery in Egypt. It led to their experience of salvation, their escape from their bondage, the crossing of the Red Sea and their freedom. But the festivities and the fun, the finickity attention to the minute details of their liturgy and sacrificial system had, over the centuries, turned it all into some kind of Vanity Fair. It was an occasion dominated by the rigid observation of customs and traditions, of legal expectations and commercial practice. Indeed, it had become for the Jews of Jesus's day, very much like the festival of Christmas in our own day.

And the place where all this was happening; the vast, soaring, magnificent, awe-inspiring, Temple of Herod, one of the wonders of the ancient world, had become a bazaar, a souk, a marketplace. In other words, the building intended to set the scene for the most jaw-dropping memories of a whole people had simply become a kind of grandiose barn.

I remember the story of Andrew Marr's dad. He kept a special rose that he protected from predators by building a simple wooden fence around it. As his dad got older so he became less able to look after it. Andrew Marr describes the occasion when, at the last, he saw the rose wilting and dying even though the fence protecting it had begun to sprout and showed every sign of new life.

The theological or architectural constructs which we build painstakingly in order to impress the gaze of onlookers or to give voice to the subtlest nuances of religious belief, can too easily end up by taking over and suffocating the ideas which gave them birth.

So Jesus addresses the myopia of his people and castigates them for their lack of imagination, their one-dimensional thinking, their tunnel vision and reductionism. He overturns the tables of the traders. And he speaks of the diminution (in his eyes) of the Temple. He makes a distinction between the idealism which got the Temple built (an exercise which took all of 46 years) with the exhilaration and enthusiasm, the energy and the euphoria of those who saw it towering above them in the time of its construction and with the flattened and mundane, the profit-and-loss use to which it had been diminished.

And then he offered them an alternative. He suggested that his very *raison d'être*, the cornerstone of the edifice that he wanted to build, would be found NOT in

something that begins its life on an architect's drawing board; NOR in some programme summed up in a body of regulations of forbidding proportions. RATHER it would be found in a body of teaching, in a life lived for others, in a sustainable set of core beliefs that could and would withstand the depredations of suffering and "the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune" (Shakespeare again!). It would even face up to (and face down) Death itself.

Jesus was offering not a business plan but a plan-for-life. Its bottom line would be the flourishing of the human spirit and life in all its fullness.

Yes he was interested in the idea of putting together, of building up, a body of thinking and a style of living that would avoid the fate that so often befalls organised religion. The body of thinking would indeed be his own body which, in a mere three days, would put his whole programme together. He was, of course, referring to his resurrection, his triumph over death which is and remains a monument to life, to human life in all ages and every corner of the world. This was an alternative way of looking at things far more inspiring than the stones of Stonehenge, the mighty pyramids of Egypt, the great wall of China, the classical and timeless beauty of the Parthenon and the rough beauty of the Inca temples – all put together. This was a monument whose crowning glory and whose deepest meaning can be stamped on the heart of the simplest believer. And such believers can know that they are free, free as a bird, free to live, free from fear, free to raise our faces to the heavens and thank the giver of our freedom.

I read of a troubling incident that befell two small boys in the early part of their lives. They both loved their toys and, in particular, their building blocks. They both loved to build towers. One day, the older boy was bent on building a tower to end all towers. But he ran out of building blocks. So he turned to his younger sibling and asked if he could borrow his. With some resentment, and after extracting a promise that they'd be returned, the younger boy obliged. So the elder brother built a monumental tower which everyone admired. Alas! When the younger brother asked for the return of his blocks, he discovered that this was impossible. For the other boy had glued all the blocks together in such a way that they could never again be separated. A mighty tower and a hugely crestfallen baby brother. That's what happens when we set our sights on building to impress, on failing to note the human dimensions of our activities. And even little children are caught up in these delusional ways of behaving. (Perhaps I should just add, for the record, that the child who glued his brother's blocks into his enormous tower was none other than the man who today finds himself the President of the USA).

We cannot look at things in this way. We must keep faith with the idea that gives us life, with the instinct that allows us to take the risks of faith, with the promptings of God's Holy Spirit. For we have received access to the very grace of God. As St Paul puts it, we, through faith, have found the secret of life. We have found peace with God, peace in our troubled hearts, hope has become ours. And the glory of God warms us, enlightens us, transforms us, fills our souls.

However we build our lives, whatever space we inhabit, let it never be at the expense of these precious intimations of our faith. Amen