

The Solemnity of the Dedication of the Church
30 June/1st July, 2018

“That You Too...May Be Living Stones Making a Spiritual House”

Last weekend we celebrated a feast which is so important that it displaces the normal Sunday. This weekend we have another one, though this is very different from the Feast of the Birth of John the Baptist.

Today we celebrate the seventh anniversary of the dedication of our lovely and wonderful parish Church which has the rather long official title of the Church of the Sacred Heart of Jesus and St Peter the Apostle. The Church was opened and dedicated by Bishop Crispian on July 1st, 2011. When the feast falls on or either side of a Sunday it replaces the normal Sunday Mass for our parish. This is because the commemoration of the dedication of a parish church is the highest kind of feast, known as a ‘solemnity’. The Mass for the dedication of a church even takes precedence over the Mass for a feast of Our Lady and this is because the church in any particular place represents the presence of Christ there. The universal Church is the Body of Christ, the presence of Christ in the world today, and any individual church building also stands for Jesus’ presence in that place and you and I who worship here are the living body of Christ.

The readings today express this idea very powerfully. In the first reading from the First Book of the Kings, King Solomon has just built the Temple in Jerusalem so that God can live on earth among His people. Before, God was hopelessly distant from people in heaven, from now on, His presence will be in the Holy of Holies in the Temple and people can visit the place to pray and make sacrifice to the Lord. Solomon finds it hard to believe that God has deigned to lower Himself and come down to earth and pitch His tent among human beings. Of course, as St Paul says in the Letter to the Romans, God has always been present in a veiled kind of way in the beautiful things He has made, in nature and creation, but in the Temple, He is present in a more tangible way.

Eventually God was to come among His people in a much more accessible way still when He made His home, through His Spirit, in the human body

of Jesus in the womb of the Virgin Mary. Jesus is the living Temple where God comes among us to show us how to live as His children in the person, presence and life of Jesus who is fully God and fully human. After Jesus died, rose again and returned to His Father in heaven, They sent the Holy Spirit to live, first, in Mary and Jesus' disciples, and then in each one of us at our baptism so that we are now all Temples of the Holy Spirit, other Christs.

St Paul tells us in the second reading that we are the living stones which make up the spiritual house that is the Church, the presence of God in the world and that, as such, we 'are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a consecrated nation, a people set apart to sing the praises of God who has called [us] out of darkness into his own wonderful light'.

We, in fact, are most 'the Church' when gathered for the Sunday Mass because as well as Jesus being present in each one of us through His Spirit, He also comes into our midst in the Eucharist and unites us with his life-giving sacrifice by which our sins are taken away and we are reconciled with God. It is here, then, in this building that we are united with Jesus in a very special bond through which He deepens and strengthens the life of God's Spirit within us so that we may go out into the world like living tabernacles carrying the presence of Christ wherever we go, bearing witness to his love and goodness through our acts of love towards others and 'singing the praises of God'. In this way, the church gathers us together in Christ, feeds us with His life and sends us forth to carry His light to the world. In the words of an old poem:

Christ has no hands but our hands to do his work today
He has no feet but our feet to lead men in his way
He has no tongue but our tongue to tell men how he died
He has no help but our help to bring men to his side.

This church is our church, our family home as Christians, we have every right to be here and to come here for hope and solace, for fellowship and healing, for love and compassion and for an authentic encounter with Jesus through His word, His sacraments and through one another. Pope Francis described the Church as 'a field hospital', there to bring healing and strength to the wounded, to offer nurture and care to neglected, the outcast and the stray. This is where people come in time of loss or bereavement, of crisis,

of sickness, to celebrate life's joys and successes and seek comfort and reassurance for its sorrows and heartbreaks.

In the seven years since its consecration, this church has already celebrated births, first communions, confirmations, marriages, anniversaries. It has welcomed lives that are just beginning into this world and ushered lives that have ended into the next. It has hosted parties, international Masses, ecumenical services, interfaith events, school celebrations, social gatherings, talks, courses and all sorts of outreach and service to the community through the parish centre. It is the heart of our family life and a hub of service for the wider community.

We have much to celebrate and give thanks for in this seventh year. In the bible, every seventh year is a year of Jubilee, a time of special thanksgiving and celebration, a time to make up quarrels, to settle debts, to forgive hurts but also to give thanks to God for all his gifts to us, for our togetherness as his family, for the goodness of care of our brothers and sisters in our community and for the faith and love we share in common. Seven in the bible is the sacred number, the holy number and it serves to remind us especially on this anniversary that our church is sacred, consecrated to the service of God in Jesus and it is here that its sacred purpose is served and fulfilled in gathering us in love and fellowship, fortified by the very lifeblood of Jesus, to be living stones making up a spiritual house so that we may sing the praises of God.