

‘The Temple of God is sacred; and you are that Temple’

Ezek 47: this water comes from the sanctuary Ps 45: the waters of a river
give joy to God’s city 1Cor 3: *You are God’s building.*
Jn 2: ‘*stop turning my Father’s house into a market!*’

Today, in this country, it’s *Remembrance Sunday*. It’s been celebrated for over 100 years, since the end of the First World War, as a commemoration of those *hundreds of thousands of servicemen & women* who gave their lives in the armed forces in that war and also in the conflicts since — and whilst most of our population doesn’t have any recollection of the horrors of the two World Wars, yet there are still some for whom those tragedies were (and remain) very real. The other year, for the centenary of the outbreak of WWI, the Tower of London had a remarkable installation of 888,000 ceramic poppies in the moat area — a moving visual reminder of the huge and tragic loss of life in the Great War, and indeed in any war. Their remembrance before God is very important to us: a reminder to us of the supreme price they paid to defend our own lives, giving us, and so many others in conflict zones still today, a lasting safety.

But in the wider Church, today, we make remembrance of a particular church in Rome, *the Lateran basilica*. This (and not St Peter’s!) is the Pope’s cathedral, for it was alongside this great church that the Popes resided from the 4th to the 14th c. Way back at the very beginning of the Christianization of the Roman empire, this site — formerly belonging to an influential Roman family, the *Laterani* — was given for a papal palace and church, and on the 9th November 324 the church was consecrated. It’s formal dedication is to ‘the Most Holy Redeemer and SS John the Baptist and John the Evangelist,’ usually shortened simply to St John Lateran.’ Back in 1993 when I went to seminary in Rome, my first visit to St John Lateran’s was on a very grey day, and I remember not being impressed with the basilica at all. It also had the disadvantage of having sustained damage that summer in a mafia bombing campaign as a violent reaction to Pope John Paul II’s recent denunciation of the mafia in Sicily. So, in fact, I didn’t return to visit St John Lateran for about 3 yrs, even though living in Rome. When I finally did go

back, how false I discovered my memory was! It was a bright spring day, then; the sunshine was pouring in, and the basilica was truly *beautiful* — I would always now strongly recommend a visit! The exquisite statues of the apostles and St Paul in the nave, and above all the stunning *cathedra* in the apse — the Pope's seat as bishop of Rome — make it a must-see in any Rome pilgrimage. When we were there this summer for the Holy Year's massive 'Jubilee of Young People,' we queued for *ages* in the baking midday heat with thousands of other lively, colourful and noisy young Catholics, to make sure that we got to enter through the Lateran Holy Door and in to the Pope's ancient basilica. Written on the front of St John Lateran, because it is the Pope's cathedral, it says, "*the Mother and Head of all the Churches of the City and the World*" ... This shows us that our annual remembrance of the dedication of the Lateran basilica (or indeed any church) is not about looking back to the past, but giving thanks for the present: we are thankful for the Catholic Church's presence right through the past 2000 years of

history, which has allowed us to know Jesus Christ. Above all, we give thanks for the papacy — and pray especially today for the Pope Leo's ministry to the world, elected 6 months ago: a living reality of encouragement and strengthening the Church in faith, mercy and credibility.

In both these elements of remembrance — remembrance of the dead of the World Wars, and remembrance of the Lateran's Dedication in 324AD — it's not a mere looking back in nostalgia, but a *thanksgiving in prayer for what we have received* as a result: the blessings brought to us by the sacrifices and efforts of those before us. The fact that we live now, *so fully alive today*, is thanks to what they undertook. There were sufferings for them: whether the huge loss of life of soldiers defending our country; whether the countless martyrdoms in the 3rd c. of the saints in Rome who paved the way for the establishment of the empire as Christian in the 4th c. This was all so that we might benefit.

It's this joyful theme that is deliberately brought out by the readings of the feast: the fruitful graces, blessings

and peace that spring from being part of the Church. The powerful imagery in the 1st reading from Ezekiel illustrates the *streams of goodness* that flow out of the Temple, making the world wholesome. The Temple, sacred locus of God's dwelling place amongst mankind for all those years of Judaism from 1000BC to Our Lord's own day, stood for the place from which many blessings flowed; no wonder the Jews all flocked there especially for the festivals including the feast (and octave) of the dedication of the Temple. Yes, from God's holy dwelling on Mt Zion — from the prayer and sacrifices offered at that holy site of pilgrimage — came graces that cleansed, refreshed, and brought a sense of life in abundance way beyond mere natural life — hence the extravagant image of *fruitfulness* that was anew every month, and the fact that it was for healing, too, *medicinal*. As always, the Temple is a pre-figuring of the Church, the ultimate conduit of God's rich blessing to the world.

In the 2nd Reading St Paul says, "*for God's Temple is holy, and you are that Temple.*" He helps his hearers move

on from the Jewish idea of a single fixed place of primary sacrificial worship — the Temple in Jerusalem — and embrace a new attitude, a Christian one, in which each believer is now an anointed dwelling-place for God, a receiver of the indwelling Holy Spirit: "*You are God's building.*" The Christian believer is a more precious, greater 'temple' than any physical building can ever be, however sacred a location, and so we should guard that temple with great care, and know that we are God's 'living stones' which build a holy dwelling, the Church.

Continuing that theme, in the Gospel, Jesus vigorously clears the Temple in Jerusalem to be a space for honouring *God Himself*, the Father, reinforcing for the shocked onlookers that it is not first the building itself but the people's *relationship with God* that matters: we too are reminded that we need to preserve that sacrosanct interior space which is not a market for worldly intrusions. The whole meaning of any feast of the Dedication of a Church — in this case the ancient and significant Lateran Basilica — is that *the Church is a living being, its holy people, and*

thereby brings to life; that the Church (our prayer and love of God) explains the world; not the world or human psychology which explains (or explains away) the Church. The Church and not the world is in some way, then, the more primary thing, the more fundamental, the more important. The Church comes first ... in the sense that *we are made for God* before we are made for anything else. So then, even our sufferings need not be a source of difficulty — in fact, it is only through those challenges that the Church is built up. As we make our ‘remembrances’ today, let’s truly remember that *Christ is the fullness of our remembrance*: the one whose life, death and resurrection we recall because He is *here and now* our life and our salvation. This existence of ours in the Church — here & now, our Chaplaincy, our parishes at home, our prayer groups, our spiritual support of one another, in communion with Pope Leo in Rome and the Church across the world — brings us that perfect encounter with the living Lord. He died, so that we might live: that’s what Our Blessed Lord established the Church for, *that we might have life,*

and have it more abundantly.