

## **Dedication Festival - St Michael's Mount Dinham - 2018**

Genesis 28: 11-18. John 10: 22-29.

'And he was afraid and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

The key word - 'afraid'.

I thought to myself, the dear people of Mount Dinham will have had a splendid celebration of Michaelmas and, knowing your preacher, have done so with a great sermon. I must focus on the Dedication.

However, try as you might at this or any time of year, you cannot get away from angels.

There they are again up and down that ladder, engaged in the task for which they were created, making the link between earth and heaven, the divine and the human, the mortal and the immortal.

We look first at the Gospel reading - John 10: 22-29, perhaps using that sentence from Genesis as a mirror through which to see it. We may come back to the angels later.

Jesus was in Jerusalem for the Feast of Dedication of the Altar or the Feast of the Purification of the Temple (Hanukkah) This occurs in December and lasts eight days. A candle is lighted each day in observance of this celebration, which recalls the victories of Judas Maccabaeus (165 B.C.). When Antiochus Epiphanes, the king of Syria (175-164 B.C.), tried to abolish the Jewish religion, he attacked Jerusalem. He killed 80,000 Jews, profaned the temple courts and chambers, and sacrificed swine to the pagan god Zeus on the temple altar. Judas Maccabaeus and his brothers fought Epiphanes and won. They cleansed and restored the temple and rebuilt the altar. This Feast of Hanukkah is still celebrated by the Jews. John referred to the various Jewish feasts more than the other gospel writers.

"And it was winter". Jesus is here ending his attempts to call the nation. From this point on, in the Gospel of John, He talks to His own, to those who will become the new Israel. He will not make another public call. It is now too late for that harvest. The Lamb of God is being prepared to go to the Cross and die for the sins of the world.

'And Jesus was walking in the Temple in the portico of Solomon. So the Jews gathered round him and said, 'How long will you keep us in suspense?'

There was a big porch out there which was for Gentiles, for those who were outside the nation Israel. Jesus was no longer coming into the temple. It was winter, and He walked in Solomon's colonnade. I'm not sure why they called it that because Herod built that bit but whatever. People often walked there to meditate, pray, and teach.

Jesus had made His identity very clear, and those who accepted him understood that He was the Messiah, the Christ. Remember, that Andrew had told his brother, "We have found the Messiah" Nathaniel also recognized Him, "Rabbi, thou art the Son of God; thou art the King of Israel". The Samaritan woman understood who He was; and the Samaritan men said, "Now we believe; not because of your saying; for we have heard Him ourselves, and know that this is indeed the Christ, the Saviour of the world". Also the man healed of his blindness believed and worshipped Him. Now these religious leaders with their subtle questions are actually casting the blame on Him! They make it sound as if it is Jesus' fault for not giving enough information, but it is their lack of willingness to believe what God had revealed to them. Well, Jesus has revealed His Messiahship to those who will hear, and now He declares it - again - to these leaders of religion.

(John 10:25-26) Jesus answered them, I told you, and you believed not: the works that I do in my Father's name, they bear witness to me. But you believe not, because you are not of my sheep, as I have already said to you'.

The problem was not in Jesus' lack of credentials. The problem was in the unbelieving heart.

They were like the child who goes on asking the same question over and over because the answer is not the one they want to hear.

They would rather have the search for the Messiah, the expectation of the Messiah, the hope of a Messiah than the arrival of a Messiah who did not fit their expectations and world view.

At many times in its history the Temple could rightly be described as a 'thin place'. A place where the boundaries between worlds become permeable, where earth and heaven meet. A place which channelled the love of ordinary folk for their God

What keeps a place 'thin' is not the place itself or the fact that it was once consecrated but the spiritual activity within it: the people who come with

encounter with God and the spiritual world as their motive - even if their focus has to be on the building.

Many of those who were challenging Jesus would have had to focus on the building, its maintenance, its liturgy, its relationship with authority. But they seem to have allowed their focus to become their motive. 'We have to keep the show on the road. We cannot allow this kind of would-be Messiah to derail it'.

I doubt they saw it like that at all. Not then. Perhaps it would later be for them, as T S Eliot wrote,

' . . . and the awareness of things ill done and done to others' harm Which once you took for exercise of virtue.'

Many Pharisees later became Christians - after the cross and resurrection.

Now what of us and that mirror we have in the story of Jacob. Here we have a temple dedicated 150 years ago which, for many many people has been a place where the unseen walls have become thin: a place where they have encountered the living God and earthed that encounter in their daily lives. That is the first and most important thing about it. True there are problems, as with any building. Some people I know see all church buildings as a millstone and a hindrance to Mission. Well they might choose to consider what the witness of this soaring spire is for - apart from the peregrine falcons of course.

Jacob did not have a building so he took a stone. So did the builders of this place before any of us were born. Jacob anointed that stone. That has been done here not just once, at the consecration, but thousands upon thousands of times as those who went before us and we in our day anoint these stones with the oil of our prayers and praise. It is the fervent, heartfelt prayers of the people of God in this place that make it and will keep it a thin place.

When I was archdeacon of Barnstaple I was fortunate to have an Educational Trust and I proposed to the Rural Deans that we should have a weekend for Churchwardens. I asked them to ask their Wardens what they felt they needed. I conflate for the purpose of this sermon a number of their responses. 'Don't tell us about the problems with buildings, we know about them! Remember archdeacon, Churchwardens are Christians too.' So, at their request, in response to their own understanding of the need, we had a weekend of prayer, and study and worship focussed around what the work of a Churchwarden demanded of people who were giving

their service sometimes to the detriment of their spirituality. They insisted on the title, 'Churchwardens are Christians too.'

Similarly, a priest who had seven church buildings in his Team (this was before Mission Communities) lamented, 'I have spent the entire xxxxxx week talking about buildings, talking to builders, wrestling with the DAC. When have I had chance to talk about God with my people?'

In both cases the focus and the motive were still distinct. A necessary focus on the tasks in hand but clear self-inflicted reminders that God and the life of the Spirit is the motive.

Those of us who are really fond of the liturgy and wear funny hats every time we get a chance would do well to keep engraved upon our hearts - 'focus must not replace motive'. We do what we do as well as we can because it is what we can offer to God and his people.

Now that word I claimed as the key in Genesis - 'afraid'. Not fear as in nervous or anxious but the kind of response that comes when we encounter something - someone who is greater than we ever imagined - awe.

It happened to Jacob when he was engaged in the mundane task of making his bed and getting some sleep - against all the odds.

Shall we not make at least an attempt to allow the same to happen to us. Whether we are at the altar, taking refreshment together in fellowship, cleaning the brass - and I remember Elsie who aged 90 cleaned the brass in Colyton church and could be heard singing the Prayer Book collects to herself as she did so - tidying the mess the visiting clergy have made in the Sacristy - the thousand and one essential tasks that keep this place available for God and people to meet. Should we be surprised if occasionally our desire to be open to God in the daily task is rewarded by a sense of awe and presence in this thin place.

A number of you will be aware of my fondness for certain poets among them Francis Thomson 1859 to 1907. The Kingdom of God

I have used this before with you but I make no apology for doing so again. It is a reminder that once you have found yourself in a specially thin place like this you will discover them wherever you go.

The angels keep their ancient places;  
Turn but a stone, and start a wing!  
'Tis ye, 'tis your estrangèd faces,  
That miss the many-splendoured thing.

But (when so sad thou canst not sadder)  
Cry;—and upon thy so sore loss  
Shall shine the traffic of Jacob's ladder  
Pitched betwixt Heaven and Charing Cross.

Yea, in the night, my Soul, my daughter,  
Cry,—clinging Heaven by the hems;  
And lo, Christ walking on the water  
Not of Gennesareth, but Thames!

Venerable David Gunn-Johnson - Sunday 30<sup>th</sup> September 2018.

