

25th October 2015
Genesis 28: 11 - 18; 1 Peter 2: 10;
John 20: 22 – 29

All are welcome in this place
Dedication Sunday 2015

By Leslie Spatt

Dedication is really quite a scary word. It implies giving oneself over to an ideal, a person, a goal or purpose – with a focus and single-minded-ness which can take over one's life. Commitment is something similar, while “involved” isn't quite on the same scale. None are really big business when it comes to a lot of present day life; which seems obsessed with the “now”, with instant gratification, with celebrity and glitz of the moment rather than having to really work at and for something. As Colin Pinnell reminded me earlier this morning, the definition of “English breakfast” is that the chicken is “involved”, but the pig is “committed”. And neither is “dedicated” to only providing breakfast!

We do “dedication” in various ways. Today we dedicate the building of St Mary's to worship, to renewal, to providing somewhere inviting and open so everyone can share in a life with God. Dedicated to us, as well, not only to those of us who come here regularly, but also to people who are curious – who look at the outside of the church, set in a wonderful location, but wonder what goes on inside. Dedicated to the worship of God, in many ways and with varying approaches. And it's in that dedication, our giving ourselves and this building over to God, that we trust that God will in turn become closer to us, have more meaning in our lives and perhaps even create in us a purpose and direction for living.

In the current Newsletter, Simon reminds us that the Dedication Festival “is a good opportunity to connect the purpose of the building and its significance for faith with its architecture, history and past.” And we remember that there's been worship here for centuries, probably for more than 1200 years. That's a LOT of worship, prayer, adoration, bread and wine and intercessions; all of which are spiritually soaked into the stones of the Saxon foundations somewhere underneath us, right through to our present day “Grade I with a million stars” listed church all around us.

And then, of course we remember everyone who has worshipped, wondered, laughed, sung and cried here. Although the building is thought of as “the church” in fact WE are the church – we are the living stones who make up the Body of Christ, with Christ as the cornerstone of our faith – a spiritual cornerstone and pathway to God which holds all of us together, just as a physical cornerstone holds a structure together. Without us, there is no church, however beautiful or grandiose or expensive the building. A church without a congregation isn’t a living church – it’s a museum. But it is possible to have and “be church” celebrating the Eucharist halfway up Mount Sinai at dawn, for example; because there are people gathered together for worship.

Dedication applies to us as well. How do we dedicate ourselves, commit ourselves, thinking of both the building and us as the Body of Christ? The letter of Peter reminds us that we are a chosen race, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s own people, in order that we may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light. Do we have the courage and determination to hand over our lives to God, can we find the spiritual and emotional strength to let go any part of us? This might mean giving time, money or expertise in the physical sense; or letting ourselves trust, hope, pray and have faith - even in the absence of any tangible presence of God “doing something” with or to us.

St Mary’s, the building, is a witness to the presence of God. We can think about how we bring others to know the reality of God. Just by being here, St Mary’s is reminding the world that Christians have gathered and worshipped here for centuries, who care enough to keep on coming in and finding...something. While outreach and publicity is invaluable to spread the message of both St Marys and the Good News, we need to “be” as well as to “do.” To remain open, non-judgemental, accessible, inclusive. To sit, waiting, and always extending the invitation to “come and see”.

We’re offered the image of Jacob’s ladder, reaching right up into heaven. Jacob has a dream where God promises him the most awesome things, and Jacob realises that God has touched him in this vision, shown that there’s a way to heaven through trusting God’s promises. The angels travel between God and earth to give assurance of God’s presence and just possibly messages of encouragement. Come on, keep going! or Follow us! they might say.

There are people all around us who might be searching for a way to find God, maybe on an approach route but not seeing clearly, or afraid to come any closer. Who might feel, looking up from the bottom of the ladder – or the outside of St Mary’s - that they’re not “good enough” to come to church.

Some of them might have one foot on the lowest rung of the ladder but are afraid of any more commitment. Some might be searching for the safest way up; but then, we have to ask, are commitment and dedication always meant to be safe! And indeed others, both inside and outside St Mary's, who may be partway up the ladder but unwilling to risk climbing further in order to discover what God really wants for them. There might even be some of us who feel we are really quite advanced and right up there on the pathway to heaven – but is that pride?? There are ladders – and snakes, we can and do fail and get it wrong, slide down and fall. But then, assured of forgiveness and love, pick ourselves up and start to climb again, as we're meant to do.

Where are we on Jacob's ladder? How can we take part in this festival of dedication – rejoicing in St Mary's the building and St Mary's the people both creating "church" together. We can "be" and "do". We can not only trust and have faith but also remind the world that this building exists for everyone. Jesus offers us eternal life in all its fulness, not some vague time in the future but now, here; and more importantly to invite others into that eternal life by following the way he shows us. Jacob had a vision of the ladder to heaven. For us, Jesus is the ladder into the heaven of the love of God. So, as we celebrate this Dedication Sunday, let's remember to rejoice both in our church building and ourselves. Let's remember that dedication and commitment are indeed scary, require hard work, trust and faith. But also know that we don't need to be afraid of taking the risk of giving ourselves over to God.

Let us build a house where all are named, their songs and visions heard; and loved and treasured, taught and claimed as words within the Word. Built of tears and cries and laughter, prayers of faith and songs of grace, let this house proclaim from floor to rafter: all are welcome, all are welcome, all are welcome in this place. Amen.

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