

26th July – Ezra 6:13-22 ‘Dedicated to our faithful God’

On 19th March 1882, the cornerstone was laid for a major new church in Barcelona. Originally conceived as a beautiful but fairly conventional late-19th century design, the project was taken over a year later by Antoni Gaudi and completely transformed. Today, in 2020, 138 years after the laying of the cornerstone it is still being built. We’ve just seen a plan of the finished design – due for completion in 2026 – and watched the cross being placed in 2018 at the top of the Passion Facade on one side of the church.

It is of course the world-famous Sagrada Familia. I’ve been privileged to visit the basilica twice – in 2002 with Alise and then again with Alise and the kids in 2012. It is my favourite building in the whole world, and apart from its stunning and unique beauty, what makes it so special, so exciting, is that it’s one of the only places in the world where you get to see a majestic holy place being built right before your eyes. We often marvel at how the great mediaeval craftsmen could build churches like All Saints or St Mary’s with basic tools and wooden scaffolds – and the Sagrada Familia gives you a window into that world.

I remember in 2002 that much of the nave was still cordoned off to allow the sculptors to work. So you could actually stand and watch these craftsmen at work making saints and angels. Even now you can walk up the towers and look out and down to other towers being fashioned in stone, piece by painstaking piece.

It gives us some sense of what it must have been like for Zerubbabel and the Israelites to see their temple being re-created before their eyes. To capture that excitement, but also the waiting. It took 40 years of stop-start labours, and then a burst of energy over 4 years at the start of the reign of King Darius, and finally the first part was complete. It’s worth saying that much of it was still derelict, but the main part – the Holy of Holies – was done, the courtyard was usable and the whole people could gather for the first time in two generations to worship God.

What a day that must have been! And Ezra 6 tells the story. The temple is dedicated with joy, and then a few months later, they hold the first Passover celebration, the greatest feast of all – and again the simple word used to describe it is ‘joy’. As Psalm 126 says – one of the psalms the people of God would sing on their way up to Jerusalem: ‘The Lord has done great things for us – and we are filled with joy!’

But this is not just a great building project. The purpose of the temple was to be the place that God meets with humanity. 500 years later a radical rabbi sat in that same temple courtyard and made this promise: ‘Destroy this temple and I will rebuild it in 3 days.’ What a strange thing to say! Never mind 140 years for the Sagrada Familia, the final Second Temple had taken 500 years to complete: and here was a chap saying he could rebuild it in 3 days?

But his friend John understood the meaning and recorded it for us in his gospel: **‘the temple he had spoken of was his body.’** (John 2:21)

When Jesus came, a new temple came too. God himself came to us in human form, and through Jesus' death and resurrection the way is clear for us to know God deeply and intimately. Jesus' body becomes the new temple, but the truth is even more amazing: Jesus also comes to dwell in us by his Spirit, so *our bodies become temples too*. We no longer need big beautiful buildings to meet with God – not even the temple in Jerusalem – because we are the temple of God now. Not because we're better than other humans, but because of Jesus, because his life offered for us brings us life, brings us the presence of God, allows us to be our own temples, where God dwells by His Spirit.

Just as Gaudi transformed a standard cathedral to be something amazing, transcendent – so Jesus transforms the temple in Jerusalem to be something even more extraordinary: and something which is still being built today. Each one of us can be dedicated to God with joy.

Perhaps today is a moment for each of you to offer yourselves again to God, to invite him into your life, to dwell in your heart by his Spirit. And may this be your prayer as it is mine: 'The Lord has done great things for me – and I am filled with joy.'

I invite you, if you wish, to join in this prayer with me:

Lord Jesus, thank you that you love me.

Thank you that died for me, that I might be forgiven.

I gladly receive your forgiveness and your love.

Please come to be with me by your Spirit, and fill my heart with joy.

I offer my life to you, and ask you to help me become the person you made me to be.

Thank you, Jesus. Amen.

If you prayed something like that for the first time, do get in touch with me so that I can pray for you as well – there's an email at the end of the service or my work email is on the 'contact us' page of the church website.

We're going to thank Jesus, who took the place of the Passover Lamb, becoming the sacrificial lamb for us, and sing 'All hail the Lamb'.