

9th July 2023 – The People of God #6 ‘Indwelt by God’ (Ephesians 2:18-22)

One day on my recent holiday we visited Lindisfarne, or Holy Island. We’d only been once before, in the summer of 2019, so, when Amelie suggested that she’d like to go, I thought it would be good to try again. Holy Island has played a very significant role in the spiritual life of our nation. Founded as a centre of worship and mission by St Aidan in the 7th century, whose ministry saw the conversion of much of Northern England to Christianity, it rose to even greater prominence under his successor St Cuthbert. St Cuthbert’s followers were instrumental in the establishment of Durham Cathedral and two centuries later it was a dream of St Cuthbert which inspired King Alfred, who went on to unify the nation and, crucially, determine once and for all that England’s spiritual roots and heritage would be Christian. In other words, we have a huge amount to be grateful to Lindisfarne for.

Unfortunately, nowadays Holy Island is the most touristy place in Northumberland. Whilst there are some lovely reminders of its past, in summer season you go to Holy Island to pay £6 just to park, buy semi-religious merchandise from surprisingly numerous vendors, and drink over-priced mead from a bloke dressed rather unconvincingly as a Viking. I was horrified to discover later in my holiday that Lindisfarne Mead was actually cheaper to buy from Beadnell Village Stores where we were staying than it was on the premises of St Aidan’s winery (yes, really – the famously self-denying monk would be turning in his grave) on the island itself.

But enough of my whining; I must go out of season to see if the place feels more like I hoped it would – what the Celtic Christians called a ‘thin place’: that is, a place on earth where God feels particularly close, where, if you like, the gap between earth and heaven feels thin.

I wonder where your thin places are? Where do you encounter God? I must confess I felt much closer to God watching the Arctic Tern colony on Beadnell beach than I did on Holy Island. Many of us find such a place in a building, especially one that has been used for worship and prayer for hundreds of years. Don’t get me wrong: the church is the people, that is our great spiritual reality and indeed the main theme of this talk is how we as God’s people are the ultimate ‘thin place’, where we can meet with God. But it’s interesting to observe how many of us can also feel led to encounter God in particular places, even if we know in our hearts, as St. Paul says, that God does not live in houses made by human hands.

Sadly, this week we’ve also witnessed renewed tensions between Israel and Palestine. Now is not the time or place to comment on the ins and outs of that, but it reminded me of the much bigger and longer outbreak of violence in the year 2000, triggered by the visit of Israeli politician Ariel Sharon to the Temple Mount in Jerusalem. Of all the ‘thin places’ in the world, the Temple in Jerusalem is the most hotly contested. Nowadays the area is primarily a Muslim site, but you can still see the last remains of the old Jewish temple – actually the Second Temple, dating to Jesus’ time – and many devout Jews praying there through the day, at what has become popularly known as the wailing wall.

For an orthodox Jew, the temple is the heart of their worship, because for them it is *the* place on this earth where God dwells, and where God meets with his people. Promised to King David, built by King Solomon, the temple was the centre of all the major Jewish festivals, as well as a place of pilgrimage to make thank offerings and other sacrifices. The original temple was completely destroyed by Nebuchadnezzar’s army in 587BC but after the return from exile, it was slowly rebuilt and finally completed by Herod the Great – who was the nasty Herod around at the time of the birth of Jesus.

For a set of buildings of that time, it was on a huge scale. Although the Holy of Holies was built to specifications prescribed by the Lord – 90 feet long, 30 feet wide and 45 feet high, the whole Temple Mount complex ran to some 36 acres and included several different court areas as well as hundreds of feet of colonnades. It had to be big – any of the major festivals would attract tens of thousands of pilgrims, often more the doubling the actual population of Jerusalem.

But the point is, **its size and magnificence was ultimately for one reason only**: because in the Holy of Holies on the Day of Atonement, *that* was when Yahweh, Almighty God, met with his people and forgave their sins. This great God, Yahweh, was so holy that only the High Priest could enter this building where the sacred altar was, placed on the ark of the covenant, and only once a year, and tradition has it that he always had a piece of rope tied round his waist, so that if the experience was too overwhelming he could be pulled out by others without them going in.

This glorious temple was itself destroyed by the Romans in 70AD after the Masada rebellion, but ever since, every faithful Jew longs for the rebuilding of the temple, the place on earth where God dwells and where we humans can meet him.....

Imagine the shock then, when St Paul's hearers heard him say this: you, as followers of Christ are being joined together and rising to become a holy temple in the Lord (v21). This was *before* the physical temple had been destroyed in Jerusalem, and yet here it is, in black and white: you are the temple of God now. In other words, you are the place where God dwells. Which is exactly how Paul explains what he's just said in the next verse, v22: 'In Christ, you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by His Spirit.'

Just take a moment to let that sink in. Picture a dominant worldview where divinity only meets humanity in certain places – that's not just the Jewish faith, although the image here is primarily Jewish, it was the Greek and Roman religion, too; indeed Ephesus, to where Paul is writing, had an enormous temple dedicated to worship of the goddess Diana, and you can still see the ruins of that today. And yet, here St Paul says something truly astounding, truly revolutionary: thanks to Jesus God doesn't live just in a certain buildings anymore: God lives in you. He lives in your hearts, and he also lives in your Christian communities. **That's the ultimate definition of church: it's the place where God dwells, a community of Christ-filled hearts in which God lives by His Spirit.** Not an organisation or, dare I say it, a building, but a community of people.

And if we want to use the language of building, Paul says, then the cornerstone is Jesus Christ, and the foundation is laid by the apostles (i.e. Jesus chosen leaders and the teaching they gave which formed the New Testament) and the prophets – and this includes not just the Old testament prophets but those gifted after Pentecost with the gift of prophecy too. Since a prophet literally means a 'mouth' for God, then what Paul is saying is the foundation of the church is not its human structures, but the voice and direction of the Lord.

With those foundations, then we as a community of believers, each with the Spirit in our hearts, can be built into a spiritual building where God dwells, sharing the love of God with each other and reflecting that love to the world. **We are all, if you like, stones in that wall**, each important to the stones around it, each part of the whole structure. And this building, at one level, is never complete – it rises, Paul says – in other words it keeps being built, new stones keep being added. So, unlike the original temple, it's never finished as such, because God keeps building it.

As I draw the threads together, the point today is very simple: God dwells *here*, in our community of believers. Not in a building, but in a community of hearts all directed in worship towards God, and in love towards each other. It's why we can include online worship in our church, because we're not tied to one building, **and we give thanks for that** – but the consequence is also clear, the sting in the tail, if you like: worship is a 24/7 thing because it's not about a building or a place – we are a community together and our hearts are offered daily, hourly to God.

Our worship to the Lord is like the beams which hold it together, our care for each other is like the cement between the stones. As we give thanks today for the awesome privilege that God dwells right here, with us – let's resolve to look after this temple: after all, it's where the King lives, by his Spirit.