

I wish to begin by bringing you greetings from Wycliffe College. We are in our 141st year of ministry, with a calling from God to educate, equip and form leaders for God's Church. For those of you who may not be familiar with us, we are the second-largest Anglican seminary in North America, and, in partnership with the University of Toronto, as well as six other denominational institutions, we grant degrees at the masters and doctoral levels.

These are challenging days for theological colleges, just as they are for the Church. But in the goodness of God, Wycliffe has managed to grow its enrolment and has among its faculty some of the world's leading theologians. We can also boast a number of strategic church leaders among its graduates – four among your own roster of preachers, as well as The Rev. Dr Andrew Stirling, have a close association with the College. Where you find renewal happening in the Church, at least in the Anglican Church, you will almost always find a Wycliffe College grad.

All of this to say that if you are interested in the future of theological education, or if you had ever thought about taking courses yourself, I would be very happy to talk with you after the service. We are grateful for the support and prayers of many in Muskoka, not least because of the partnership that exists across denominational boundaries for the building up of Christ's Church here on earth.

Having said this, this morning I want us to think more deeply about the nature of this Church. I am entitling this sermon, 'The Church as the Temple of God'. It is a particularly profitable exercise to engage in where people are taking their summer holidays. Hopefully, there is something here which we can take away with us and mull over, so that when the autumn programmes get underway, we might have a renewed vision for and conviction about the Church's place in our lives, and our place in the Church's life.

So, let me introduce my topic by telling you about these two fellows who go out fishing one July Sunday morning on Lake Joseph. Both belong to LJCC, and when 10:30 rolls around, one says to the other, 'I wonder whether we should feel guilty that we're not in Church this morning.' 'I know', came the reply, 'I've been thinking a lot about that. But the truth is, I couldn't have gone anyhow. My wife is sick.'

Yes, it is a funny joke. It is also a shrewd comment on human nature, and the way many of us perceive our relationship to the Church. People *are* funny when it comes to matters ecclesiastical. Many rationally minded folk think that Christians are lunatics, and have a hard time understanding how somebody who is so sane and respectable in other areas of his life could actually *buy* this stuff. Others, who are more cynically minded, judge us all as hypocrites, and their angry letters are often featured in the comment section of the social media outlets. Within the Church, many who come week by week do so only out of loyalty to the institution. Still others come in the conviction that weekly attendance is good for them — after the manner of a certain Canadian cough syrup which trades on the idea that anything that tastes so disgusting *must* be good for you. Yet others come because it is in the Church that they feel a particular need being met.

One could easily multiply the reasons why people do or don't come to Church. Some are forced to come, or prevented from coming, by family members; some come for superstitious reasons (being afraid something bad may happen to them if they skip a Sunday); some come because it is part of their image in the community as an upstanding citizen; and some come simply because it is a habit with them. The important point in all of this list-making, however, is not to guess why our neighbour *doesn't* come to Church, or why the person in the pew next to us *does*; it is, rather to make us think, 'Now, why is it that *I* come to Church?' Why *do* you come to Church?

For the next few moments, I wish to speak generally about the what the Church is, in relation to God, our neighbour and ourselves, and to draw certain applications which I think are relevant to our Church affiliations wherever they may be, either here or at home. If you are a visitor, I apologize for discussing family matters in your presence — though I hope that something of what we touch on will give you a perspective on the Church that is different from what you are likely to find in the popular imagination.

So, what does it mean to say that the Church is the temple of God? This image appears repeatedly in Paul's

letters. 'Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells,' writes St Paul to the Church in Corinth (1 Corinthians 3.16 (REB). Or Ephesians 2.21, which we heard earlier: 'In him the whole building is bonded together and grows into a holy temple in the Lord'. Now, the temple in Jerusalem was for Jews the most holy place. It was the focus of their devotion as a nation, and pilgrimages to the Jerusalem sanctuary were held annually in order that worshippers could come from far and wide to pay homage there to the LORD. It was not that the LORD could not be found elsewhere. He is fully present in all places and at all times. 'Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool,' says the LORD in Isaiah 66.1, 'Where is the house you will build for me? Where will my resting place be?' And yet Jesus regarded the temple as 'God's house' (Mt 12.4). He held it in great respect and was jealous for its honour, as the story of his cleansing of the temple illustrates. For *this* place, above all other places, was set apart for God's glory, and it enjoyed a special manifestation of his nearness. Moreover, it was the prophet's vision that all the nations of the world would one day flock to Jerusalem to worship God at his house: 'In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house will be set over all other mountains, raised high above the hills' preached Isaiah. 'All the nations will stream towards it, and many peoples will go and say, "Let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For instruction comes from Zion, and the word of the Lord from Jerusalem' (Is. 2.2ff.). The prophet's vision reveals that the temple was meant to have universal significance, to Gentiles as well as to Jews.

Now, there is some justification for those who say that they like to worship God on the lake, at the cottage, on the golf course or ski trail, for God is everywhere. Nevertheless, he has chosen to reveal himself in a unique way today in the Church. It is as we gather together that we are his temple, designed to bring him glory in our worship and in our witness. Have you ever appreciated the fact that you, the people of Lake Joseph Community Church, are the temple of God?

When I was an assistant minister in Halifax, our Church was honoured with a Sunday morning visit by His Royal Highness, the Prince Edward. We learned about the intended visit a number of weeks in advance of his arrival, and although we were instructed not to broadcast news of our royal guest until a couple of weeks before, people shifted into high gear. Security agents carried out a thorough inventory of the property; our choir master composed a special anthem; the Church was cleaned and polished; the cord guarding the velvet-covered royal pew was let down; and a special bulletin was printed. Needless to say, when the day arrived, the Church was packed, with hundreds coming, including the bishop, to catch a glimpse of His Royal Highness. It was an extravagant affair for an important person. But I couldn't help but reflect that on each Sunday, we entertain a Visitor who is infinitely more important than the Prince Edward. We are God's house, and he himself dwells in our midst. He deserves no less a fuss when we come together for our worship; indeed, he is not just a guest, he is the *object* of our worship.

Again I ask, do we sufficiently appreciate the fact that we are God's temple? I regularly hear people say that they come to Church for many of the reasons I listed above: because they are loyal to it; because it is good for them; because they enjoy it; because they are afraid not to; and because they are expected to. I also hear the occasional complaint: 'I'm not getting anything out of Church; it's too boring; it's too noisy; it's unfriendly to children; I don't like the liturgy; I don't like the music; I don't like the minister (or even, I don't like the bishop!).' I can understand all of these comments to a point (especially the last one!), but what I don't hear nearly often enough is that people come to Church in order to worship God.

Some of us can have a very backward view of the Church. We tend to evaluate the Church on the basis of what we get from it. We can act as if the Church was a theatre where we gather together as an audience, and we expect to be entertained. The sanctuary is the stage where God and the supporting players perform, and the congregation demonstrates their approval or disapproval by their weekly attendance, by the amount they put in the collection plate, and by the way they talk about it afterwards. In our consumer driven culture, this image of the Church is common . . . and it is insidious. This is religion as a one-way street going the wrong way. For the truth is completely the reverse. *We* are the performers, and *God* is the audience. God does not visit us week by week to inspire or amuse us. He lives in our midst; and we assemble week by week to worship him. The Church is not a theatre. It is a temple.

The practical implications of this truth should be apparent. First of all, it means that we must not 'give up

meeting together, as some are in the habit of doing', to quote the letter to the Hebrews (10.25). If the Creator of the universe has deigned to be present with us in a special way when we assemble together, who in their right mind would wish to pass by any opportunity of worshipping him with fellow believers? If you travel during the summer, don't stop going to church. Find a church. Any church. And believe that God is waiting to meet with you there. It is, after all, his temple.

Then, secondly, the fact that the Church is God's temple means that we must be both responsible and responsive in our worship. We must repent of thinking that second-best is good enough for God. St Paul urges us, 'Whatever you do, whether in word or deed, do it all in the name of the Lord Jesus' (Col. 3.17). This means that every aspect of our worship must be offered to God from the best of our abilities. We need to be reminded that our order of worship, our liturgy and hymnody are not meant for our own gratification, but for the glory of God. We are not spectators or critics. There's a cartoon from the New Yorker a number of years' back where a couple have just greeted the minister at the steps of the church after the service. The husband leans towards his wife and says, 'Lousy sermon. But an amusing little wine!' Some of us, and here I am preaching chiefly to myself, need to put aside our petty biases, personal tastes and lazy inclinations, and to join whole-heartedly in our life of worship together wherever we are. For we are God's temple, and he is in our midst.

Thirdly, and finally, we do well to recognize that when we say that we are God's temple, we are acknowledging that we belong to him, and that he can have his way with us. I admit that from time to time, I have been known to say that the Anglican Church is *my* Church. I'm not alone. Perhaps all of us have a family history or investment in our churches and denominations which makes it natural for us to regard them as *ours*. But we need to be careful. The Bible does not say that we possess God, but that he possesses us. We are *God's* temple. As a leader in the Church, I confess that I find this both comforting and challenging. In times of crisis or discouragement, it is with a sense of relief that I can say to God, 'We are yours. In all our trials, you are with us, and you will never leave nor forsake us. Just show us the way and we shall follow.' But here's the challenge, for where is God leading us? Just as the temple in Jerusalem was set upon a hill as a beacon of light to the world, so God's design for us as his temple is that others should be brought to worship him through us. And this outward looking posture, this bidding to engage the world around us, this opening of our doors to any who are seeking God, this requires us to step outside our zones of comfort and take risks.

It is time to summarise and conclude. In trying to understand the New Testament's affirmation that the Church is the Temple of God, we have reminded ourselves that this means that God is with us in a special way when we worship. His presence requires our resolve to offer God both the best of our worship, but also our willingness to welcome the outsider into our midst. These things can be both exhilarating and daunting. And yet, this is as it has to be. For at the heart of the image of the Church as the temple of God is sacrifice: just as God's Son was sacrificed for us to bring us near to God, so must we be willing to give up what is dear to us in order to bring him to those who don't know him. It is my continued prayer that this conviction would take root in all of God's people; and for you in this place. May Lake Joseph Community Church be a place where the lost and the seeking can say, 'God must dwell here!'

Let us pray:

O God of unchangeable power and eternal light,
look favourably on your whole Church,
that wonderful and sacred mystery.
By the effectual working of your providence,
carry out in tranquillity the plan of salvation.
Let the whole world see and know
that things which were cast down are being raised up,
and things which had grown old are being made new,
and that all things are being brought to their perfection
by him through whom all things were made,
your Son Jesus Christ our Lord;

who lives and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, for ever and ever. Amen.

Lake Joseph Community Church

PAGE

PAGE 4