

The Lateran Basilica in Rome has an inscription, written in a stone tablet the front façade, near one of the entrances “Sacrosancta Lateranensis ecclesia omnium urbis et orbis ecclesiarum mater et caput”, which means “Most Holy Lateran Church, of all the churches in the city and the world, the mother and head”. The Lateran basilica is of course the Pope’s Cathedral – but today we celebrate a similar fact about this Cathedral – of all the churches in the city and diocese of Plymouth, this one is the mother and the head.

The anniversary of the dedication of the Cathedral is celebrated not just in the Cathedral, but is a feast for all the churches of our diocese, highlighting the importance of the cathedral to the life of the local church. Here, our bishop has his chair, or cathedra, and it’s here we celebrate the great moments of our diocesan community of faith.

This cathedral building also stands as witness to our city and community – it is a notable feature of the Plymouth skyline – a bold statement of the Catholic faith, and also the place where God is present for those who are drawn here to pray.

You hear it said “I don’t need a church to pray, my cathedral is beneath the sky; or my cathedral is the forest.” And of course we can experience God in the beauty of creation. But human beings have always built temples to the glory of God, and have experienced them as the place where God dwells.

Solomon built the first Jerusalem temple, and then he leads the people in the prayer of dedication we heard in the first reading. “Let your eyes watch over this house, day and night, over this place of which you have said: My name shall be there.” A place of prayer, and place of forgiveness.

But that Old Testament sign was “provisional” and passing, destined to be replaced with a different sign, not a building, but the Body of Christ, his Church.

Having said that, we do invest our church buildings with a sacred character, they are consecrated, set apart for a sacred purpose, that of worship and the celebration of the sacraments; indeed, in the rite of consecration, the walls and altar are treated almost like a person - the use of holy water and chrism in the rite remind us of the rites of Christian initiation.

Without the people of God to fill them, however, our sacred buildings will become empty shells. We need our church buildings, but they need us to give them their purpose, to keep alive in them that sacred meaning that was invested in them at their consecration.

We, as St Peter says, the members of the Body of Christ, form a spiritual temple not built by human hands. With Jesus, we are living stones, making a spiritual house. With Jesus we are the holy priesthood that offers the spiritual sacrifices. We are those who, in the words of Jesus to the Samaritan woman, are called to worship God in spirit and in truth.

To worship in spirit and in truth – I feel these are very exacting words – they are very easy to say, quite easy to pass over and think – yes well that’s fair enough.

But what do they actually mean?

Jesus is saying that our worship of God must truly engage our spirits or our souls in seeking to know the truth which is God, and to adore his mystery, to pay him the homage of our hearts. This is the kind of worshiper the Father wants : those who are simply and honestly themselves before him in their worship. God is sheer being itself--

Spirit. Those who worship him must do it out of their very being, their spirits, their true selves, with no pretence, no ulterior motives. Our only motive should be our love of Jesus, and our desire to be with him. A beautiful communion of heart and soul.

Not easy sometimes for us mere mortals to live up to – for sometimes we are so preoccupied, so distracted; But it is the kind of worship that God is calling us to grow towards – to become a people who worship in spirit and in truth. That is also the kind of worship whose beauty and dignity will inspire and attract people – they will experience it, and want to be part of it.

So let us ask the Holy Spirit to inspire and enable our worship of God - it is not just a matter of coming into a physical building and repeating well known words, necessary for Catholic worship though these are - God wants us to commune with him on a spiritual level also; as we celebrate the anniversary of the dedication today, let us pray that the Spirit will continue to fill us with his gifts, that we ourselves will become more and more temples of God's presence, the place where his glory dwells, so that our Cathedral will be a real and authentic witness to our community and our city.

