

Sermon given by Revd. John Geyer at the celebration of the 75th anniversary of the church buildings of Weoley Hill United Reformed Church.

MY NAME WILL BE THERE

1 Kings 8 vv10-13, vv22-30;

Ephesians. 2 vv14-22;

Matthew 5 vv14-16

With real joy, Margaret and I have travelled all the way from the Kingdom of Fife to be with you today, and I must thank you for the great honour you have done me in inviting me to preach and open to you the Scriptures on this memorable occasion.

It seems like yesterday - how often have you used that expression as you get older? - it seems like only yesterday that we were celebrating the 50th anniversary of this building and yet, sure enough, it was 25 years ago, a quarter of a century, no less.

During that time, the buildings have been under the constant care of the Fabric Committee, and you have spent much of your time, freely and lovingly given, in preserving and improving them, and much of your money as well. Even so, it hasn't changed as much as you have.

The building has aged by a quarter of a century, but it stands here recognisably the same, a landmark of Weoley Hill and of the Bournville Village Trust. We, on the other hand, might be difficult to recognise after 25 years, and certainly we would be unrecognisable by someone who hadn't seen us for 75 years. 75 years ago many of us weren't even here - I was then one year old and did, I'm quite sure, look different from the way I look now. I didn't, for example, have a beard in those days.

As a congregation, you have changed in the past 25 years (let alone the past 75) not simply in looks but, for want of a better word, in composition. What I mean is that so many of the saints who worshipped with us in days gone past, are now beyond all change and worship unceasingly in the highest glory. It is difficult for me to stand here and not to see those 'faces loved long since and lost awhile', as that man from the Oratory said in his hymn.

And that brings us at once to the dilemma we are in today - especially the dilemma of the preacher - that we are here to celebrate the 75th anniversary of a building, not the 75th anniversary of a church, because we all know that a church is not a building, it is a living body, not stones - or even bricks - and mortar.

So strongly is this our belief in the Reformed tradition that we must ask at this point whether the building is of any importance at all. I well remember John Huxtable preaching at the opening of the new building of the then Congregational Church in Newmarket, where the horses race, at a time when money was scarce and the needs of society at home and abroad were great. He based what he had to say on the story of the woman who anointed Jesus from a bottle of very costly ointment and John Huxtable took as his text for the opening of the new building the words of the indignant disciples, '*Why this waste?*' (Matthew 26 vv6-13).

We need to be reminded from time to time of the importance of a building. Of course the church is the people; of course people can worship God anywhere. But where there is a building, it has an important part to play in the divine scheme of things.

Offering the prayer at the dedication of the temple he had built, Solomon said: 'Heaven itself, the highest heaven, cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!' We must never lose sight of the glory that attaches to this place, a place of sanctity and holiness where people may compose their very selves in the presence of the eternal God. Here you are confronted with the deepest mysteries, mysteries that the human mind has never fathomed and never will fathom until this mortal put on immortality.

Solomon begins his prayer with the words, '**The Lord has caused his sun to shine in heavens, but he has said he will dwell in thick darkness**'. When the world is dark and life inexplicable, here is a place to which you may turn and be reminded of the living God whose sun shines beyond the darkness. This building is a sign to all who see it that the unapproachable divine glory is willing to be approached.

Solomon says, '**May your eyes ever be on this house night and day, this place of which you have said, "MY NAME WILL BE THERE"**'.

This is where the building and the people join in one and have the same purpose. This building stands here grandly, marking the place of which God has said '**My name will be there**', and yet it was of people that Jesus said, '**You are light for all the world. A town that stands on a hill cannot be hidden**'. St Paul tells you to '**shine like stars in a dark world and to proffer the word of life**' (Phil. 2 v15).

The expense of church buildings is argued about today. But that's not all that's argued about. People are asking whether there is any use in the church at all, any use in the people, let alone in the building. Aren't your ideas outdated, of no further use in the twenty-first century?

Many of our contemporaries in this country think like that today. They could not be more wrong. Never was there greater need of your witness, never greater need of the sacraments you offer showing that **THE NAME IS HERE**, never greater need of the Gospel you publish to all the world, in word and in action.

We live in a country that is governed by the shallow thinking of the tabloid press which thinks of justice in terms of revenge and knows nothing of regeneration or forgiveness. We live among a people afraid of their neighbours, because they are of different colour or religion. We have been led by people who misled the nation and went to war, who have left behind them nothing but lies and desolation.

'When foundations are undermined, what can the just person do?' That is the question put in the 11th Psalm. And the answer given is, '*The Lord is in his holy temple*'.

It is in that temple that the Word may be heard which will remake and reconstitute a shattered world, the Word which was in the beginning, when the world was made, the Word which became flesh and lives amongst us. Jesus said, '**Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up again**'. They did not understand that the temple he was speaking of was his body. '**After his resurrection his disciples recalled what he had said, and they believed the scripture and the words that Jesus had spoken**' (John 2 vv19,22.)

What words, other than these words about his resurrection, words that shatter the mould of evolution and create a new heaven and a new earth, what other words had he spoken?

Here are some of them. 'Love your enemies and pray for your persecutors'. 'There must be no limit to your goodness'. 'If you forgive others the wrongs they have done, your heavenly Father will also forgive you; but, if you do not forgive others, then your Father will not forgive the wrongs you have done'. 'There is still one thing you lack: sell everything you have and give to the poor' (Matthew 5 vv43,48; 6 vv14-15; Luke 18 v22).

You cannot tell me that this word is irrelevant today. People may not want to hear it, but that's a different matter. This building stands here as a place where people may come and hear the word of life; you are a living temple, so that the word may be effective in helping people and rebuilding society.

'When foundations are undermined, what can the just person do? ...The Lord is in his holy temple.'

In the next (12th Psalm) the matter is summed up like this: 'They say, **"By our tongues we shall prevail. With words as our ally, who can master us?"**'. But there is an answer from the Lord in his holy temple, **'Now I will arise, says the Lord, for the poor are plundered, the needy groan; I shall place them in the safety for which they long.'**

The word of God is eternal and does not change. For all I said about change at the beginning of this sermon, it seems that human nature and human society doesn't change all that much. Here's what the prophet Micah said two and a half thousand years ago (at least according to the Revised English Bible), **"Do not hold forth," they say, holding forth themselves ...Do not they spin words?**' (2 v6).

And what had they been up to, these spin doctors? The next verses tell you. This is what the Lord says, from his holy temple: **'You rise up as my enemy to my face, to strip the cloaks from travellers who felt safe, to drive women from their pleasant homes and rob their children of my glory.'**

As I said, Weoley Hill has never had a greater need of this building, which people may see, in which people may hear the word of him who has said, **'My name will be there'**, to which people may come and offer prayer with hope, **at times when foundations are undermined**, a building from which people go, in the power of the Holy Spirit, in answer to the prayer, **'Your will be done on earth, as it is in heaven.'**

Let us give thanks, and rededicate this building, so that all who pass by may have new hope, knowing it is there. May you continue to be a beacon of light, as you have always been, to those who come from all over the world to the Selly Oak Colleges. Here let them be welcomed. Let them know that, **'even the sparrow finds a home, and the swallow has her nest where she rears her brood beside your altars, Lord of Hosts, my King and God'** (Ps.84 v3).

In the words of the 122nd Psalm I will say, **'I rejoiced when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the Lord"...Pray for her peace..."May those who love you prosper; peace be within you"...For the sake of these my friends, I shall say, "Peace be within you". For the sake of the house of the Lord our God I shall pray for your wellbeing.'**