

Sermon, St Andrew's
Epiphany 2: 1 Corinthians 6.12-20, John 1.43-51

May we worship Thee, o Lord, in all we write and read, think and say, all we do and all we are, now and ever, through Thy Holy Spirit, in the love of Christ our Lord. Amen.

“Your body is your temple”. So, here we are, in lockdown again (no. 3, is it, this time?), and our first reading tells us “Your body is your temple”. What might St Paul mean by this, and what are we meant to do about it?

He's not alone in saying it, of course - Christ famously says it of His own death and Resurrection, rather than demolishing the second stone Temple in Jerusalem; but it is also part of a wider, longer tradition that tries to answer the eternal question “where is God?”. The Gospels say relatively little about the Church, and often focus on individual right relationship with God, His Kingdom, and love. But the question of where and how to find God, and worship Him, go back far earlier - from Moses finding Him in the burning bush not consumed by the fire, through Elijah finding Him, amid his own despair, in the wilderness; through the Tabernacle, the tent and Ark which the Israelites build to show God's journey with them; through the first Temple in Jerusalem, and its terrible destruction - until the exiles, bereft in Babylon, find the Throne of God suddenly on the move again, appearing to Ezekiel in the strangest of visions which begins his book. Much of the history of organised religion is our well-meaning attempts to codify God, to locate Him, characterise His behaviour - and, in fact, to put him in a physical or spiritual box. But, as CS Lewis says, “He's not a *tame* lion”!

“Your body is your temple”. The history of human relation with God is that wherever we are, He is. When we move, so does He. When we settle, so does He. And, when we are “stuck, like Winnie the Pooh” - then, in Incarnate solidarity with us, so is He!

The Psalms give great encouragement to the individual worshipper - “commune with your own heart, and in your chamber, and be still”.

The writer William Barclay, in a lovely little book on the Lord’s Prayer, quotes a rabbi who says “the man who prays in his house surrounds it with a wall of iron”. We make our own temples wherever we are, and God can accept that offering in love, and bless us just there. We think of our beloved churches as timeless - but they’re, perhaps inconveniently, mostly copies of Roman basilicas; and our Saviour’s ministry really takes off when he gets out of the synagogue and preaches the Sermon on the Mount, in the fresh wind from the sea. So now, when so many churches are locked or, despite best efforts, feel unsafe or inaccessible to many, it is right, though tough, for us to be turned back in ourselves, into “prayer of the heart” - to be one in spirit with all prisoners and captives; to be an underground, guerilla or commando force of Christians, embedded wherever each of us is planted.

Many of us may miss the order, beauty and peace of church, which lead us toward God, and it can take time and care to help maintain our right relationship with God (to “keep in tune with Heaven”, as Milton puts it) without that longstanding aid.

But - “your body is your temple”! I’ve spoken generally so far, about life without physical presence in church - but what, particularly, about our *bodies*? Rarely a polite subject for Anglicans, I confess! “David danced before the Lord with all his might” - but we may not think that’s quite the way the C of E should do these things!

Dickens wrote that the Inns of Court in London contain “the human mind *in excelsis* - the human body in chairs”. We can easily make the Gnostic mistake of seeing ourselves as “spirits in a material world” - but Christ took on a human body too. “What He has assumed, He has redeemed” - so our bodies are saved too! Many of us may have very different, or changing, views of our own bodies - including much embarrassment, of course. My mother used to look in the mirror and say “who’s that old girl?” - as we get older, it’s possible to view our bodies as “magnificent ruins” which will soon be left behind - but we are still in our “temples”, for now: so we need to look after them! Traditional texts on this speak of our bodies “belonging” to God or having been “bought back” by Him, but many of us can find that language unhelpful, and thinking of our bodies as God’s creation, saved by His love, and a house for His Spirit, can be more useful. We are called to live in healthy relationship of mind and body (as Victoria Wood misremembering the Latin, “*mens sana* in thingummy doodah”), to care for our body as we would care for our church! To maintain its order and beauty down the long march of time, to do what is needful for it at each stage - including those late steps when we give its care to others. “Glorifying God with our bodies” can feel like a strange request too. In the “Brittas Empire” sitcom, a hapless manager quotes “your body is your temple” regarding workplace relationships, but can’t then interpret it, until a colleague vaguely suggests “so, you’re saying we shouldn’t worship in one another’s temples?” (“*exactly, Carol!*”) What does “your body is your temple - glorify God with it” mean in practice - what do we do? Much of our worship can become cerebral, sedentary - but it isn’t entirely so, nor should it be. I was most moved when one lady aged

103, in the pew in front of me, apologised for not being able to kneel to pray any longer. I know that it's hard to "strengthen the feeble knees", but it's too easy to make no physical expression when we pray - which can diminish it. I try to open my hands to the Lord ("using 'open' body language") - and to kneel, when I have some way of getting up again! I was most moved when, witnessing a friend's funeral online last year, the minister asked us all to stand, at home, for the Committal - so, even without physical presence, we could still show respect with our bodies.

Speaking and (perhaps most missed by many of us) singing are of course physical worship, with our bodies, and this most intimate expression is perhaps the most beautiful way we can worship.

Singing is such a personal thing that singers can be more sensitive to criticism than instrumental players! But I hope most of us can still sing, hum or whistle somehow at home or nearby.

But "glorifying God with our bodies" doesn't stop at worship. God's glory is in the fullness of human life, and to glorify Him with our body includes the service we offer one another - "Christ has no hands on earth but yours, no feet but yours"...

So, we can glorify God with our body far more than we may think, wherever we may be. The end of all this is the final reference to a temple, at the end of the Bible, the end of Revelation, when our home is the heavenly city which needs no temple, for God is there, and we will be in the fullness of His presence. As one Epiphany hymn concludes:

"In the heavenly country bright, Need they no created light;
Thou its light, its joy, its crown, Thou its sun which goes not down;
There for ever may we sing Allelulias to our King".

May God bless us all in our temples with the richness of His grace -
in the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost.

AMEN.

*Jesus, where'er Thy people meet,
There they behold Thy mercy seat;
Where'er they seek Thee Thou art found,
And every place is hallowed ground.*

*For Thou, within no walls confined,
Inhabitest the humble mind;
Such ever bring Thee, where they come,
And, going, take Thee to their home.*

*Dear Shepherd of Thy chosen few,
Thy former mercies here renew;
Here, to our waiting hearts, proclaim
The sweetness of Thy saving name.*

*Here may we prove the power of prayer
To strengthen faith and sweeten care;
To teach our faint desires to rise,
And bring all Heav'n before our eyes.*

*Lord, we are few, but Thou art near;
Nor short Thine arm, nor deaf Thine ear;
O rend the heavens, come quickly down,
And make a thousand hearts Thine own!*