

Sermon: St Andrew, Corbridge, Parish Communion, Christmas 1, 2018

Text: Luke 2. 41-52, John 1. 14, 18

Theme: It all starts from the Temple

May the words of my lips and the meditation of our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

I don't know about you, but when I travel north on the East-Coast main-line, when the train crosses the viaduct in Durham, and I see the awesome sight of Durham Cathedral towering over the city, then I know I'm back in God's own country. Just as when the train crosses the High Level Bridge, I know I'm home in my beloved Newcastle.

For Jewish people at the time of Jesus, God's Temple in Jerusalem was a bit like that. Like the Newcastle Bridges, it was the place that was truly home. Like Durham Cathedral, it towered over the city, a monumental edifice, a sight of awe-inspiring beauty.

But for Jewish people, its significance went well beyond greatly loved landmarks or magnificent religious buildings; for Jews, the Temple was *the place* where God dwelt on earth. They believed that in the Holy of Holies, in inner-most part of the Temple, the *Shekinah*, the Presence, the glory of God, dwelt on earth. In other words, in the Temple God, the one above all, the one whose Name was too holy even to try to pronounce, was very, very near; there was real access to God. That is why pious Jews, three times a year, went on great pilgrimages to Jerusalem for the Festivals of Passover, Pentecost and Tabernacles. And because God was near, the Temple was the place above all places to pray, and the Temple was the place where sacrifice could be offered to God, to say thank you, to make vows, to receive forgiveness. There was no place on earth like the Temple.

The beginning of St Luke's Gospel makes much of the Temple. Here, the godly priest Zechariah was visited by the angel Gabriel and told of the birth of John the Baptist. Here, Mary and Joseph brought the forty day old Jesus to present him to the Lord as the first-born son; and here in today's Gospel, at Passover time, Jesus is found in the Temple, sat among the rabbis, and amazing them with his knowledge.

Why is Luke so interested in the Temple? I think he saw the Temple as a prophetic sign. Right through the Old Testament, we have this conviction of God calling human beings into relationship with himself, choosing Abraham and choosing Abraham's family, Israel. And then making his presence near, first through the portable tabernacle, the tent of meeting, in which was placed the Ark of the Covenant, as a sign that God has called Israel to be his treasured possession. And

then, after all the long years of travelling, choosing Jerusalem and Mount Zion where the Temple would be built. This would be the holiest place on earth where God would rest among his people. And so, God's glory filled the Temple.

But now, that idea is developed in the most amazing way. Listen to the words of St John:

The Word was made flesh and tabernacled among us, and we have seen his glory.

God is now dwelling among his people in a new and amazing way. Not as an intangible Presence in the Temple, but as a flesh and blood Presence in the person of his eternal Son Jesus, the Word made flesh. The Temple was pointing forward to a greater act of God's loving wisdom in the Incarnation of the Son of God. And so, for St Luke, the fact that Zechariah was in the Temple when the plan of salvation was revealed to him, the fact that Mary and Joseph presented the Son of God in the Temple, show that a greater than the Temple is here. The fact that Jesus teaches the rabbis in the Temple shows that a greater than Moses is here, a greater than Solomon is here. Jesus is the divine Presence, from whom God's glory shines. God is dwelling among his people by revealing the human face of God, the Christ-like God.

How can we be sure that God is love and beauty and wisdom? Simply because we see in Jesus, in one who is bone of our bone and flesh of our flesh, the love and beauty and wisdom of God. We worship a Christ-like God. As St John also says:

No-one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.

Through Jesus, we know the Father.

So, for St Luke, Jesus fulfills the Temple. But a second reason is that he knew that for Jews, the Temple was the centre of the world. It was a kind of starting-point. If you throw a stone into a still pool, the water ripples out from where the stone falls. So, for St Luke, the Gospel, the good news, begins from the centre. Not simply Jerusalem, but the very heart of Jerusalem, and therefore the centre of the world. It ripples out through Judea, Samaria, and across the whole known world, even as far as Rome – where Caesar thought he was god and Rome was his heaven. So in Acts Luke shows the rippling out of the gospel through the apostles and especially St Paul.

But St Paul develops the idea even further. Yes, Jesus is the new Temple. But through Jesus, the Holy Spirit is given to every Christian. The Holy Spirit is the power and love of God who dwells in our hearts. So, we are the Temple, the place

where the divine Presence and glory dwell; we are like those ripples extending outwards.

And what I want you to think about today and this week, is because we have been given the Spirit, then we are carrying the Presence of Jesus, the love of God, out from St Andrew's and into our homes, our places of work, this community. We are called to reveal and make visible the love and grace and beauty of God. And because we are God's Temple, where the Holy Spirit dwells, we are called to live lives of holiness and obedience. Again, Jesus is our model. Today's Gospel closed with the words:

Jesus increased in wisdom and years and in divine and human favour.

We are called to grow – whatever age we are, because the love of God has been poured into our hearts by the Holy Spirit given to us.

My brothers and sisters, we must live the Gospel. And we do that by reflecting the love of Jesus. We are bearers of the Shekinah, the divine Presence. We are the Temple.