

Evensong St Mary's | Epiphany 4 | 31 January 2016

1 Chr 29 : 6-19 | Acts 7 : 44-50

I was asked last week whether being a priest anything like Adam in the sit com Rev, or the Vicar of Dibley. I said Adam in Rev was not so far from reality. Because Rev is a commentary on wider society's view of the church in the city. Seen by many as an institution in terminal decline, led by kindly people who are thought of as slightly odd by the rest of the community. Humour plays on taking the ordinary and making it funny by pushing its oddities to the extreme. And it portrays the church as an organization that is irrelevant to the majority. It's true that we are increasingly seeing generations of unchurched people. Those who, growing up, have never had any contact with the church and Christian faith, and whose knowledge and understanding of the gospel is negligible.

I suppose our Choral Evensong tonight, for someone who has no inherited faith or knowledge of Christianity, is rather like coming to a wonderful concert of classical music in a beautiful old building. Inspiring music in lovely surroundings, something that lifts our spirits. Hopefully we can all share in that this evening.

But to those of us who are already Christians, tonight's service is worship, not a concert. The two books of Chronicles in the Old Testament from which our first reading came are all about worship and the significance of the Temple to the Jewish people.

One of the slightly irritating things about sitcoms and television dramas that feature vicars is that the priests always seem to appear dressed in black cassocks, fussing about in empty churches. As though midweek, between Sunday services, the majority of a vicar's time is spent doing

odd jobs in the church, waiting for people to turn up to see them, and getting ready for the next Sunday. Strangely, if these dramas were set a couple of thousand years ago in Jerusalem, they would not have been so far from reality as they are today.

On Tuesday the church celebrates Candlemas, the feast of the Presentation of Christ in the Temple. It is the moment in Luke's gospel when Mary and Joseph take Jesus, 40 days after his birth, to offer a sacrifice for him as their firstborn. As the family entered the temple they appear by chance to have met two holy people, Simeon and Anna. As I'm sure you know, we have just heard the choir sing Simeon's words, familiar to us in the Nunc Dimittis. Anna is described as a prophet who never left the temple, simply worshipping, fasting and praying every day. Simeon declares that Jesus will be a sign that will search the hearts of all God's people and reveal God's splendour. Anna continued the theme by speaking publicly of Jesus as the long awaited messiah.

This is a crucial moment in history. Temple worship was fundamental to the Jewish way of life. Anna and Simeon are pure examples of religious devotion. Their roles in the Temple don't give a picture of religion in decay as the church and its faithful are so often portrayed today.

The books of Chronicles are a reinterpretation of Israel's Deuteronomic history up to the exile. The fundamental conviction that emerges from them is that Israel was called to be a church, a worshipping community. A people whose whole life was to be a 'liturgy' or divine service. Anna and Simeon are perfect examples of this. The temple had an indispensable place in this pattern of living of their people – it was the place where they met God. A meeting that was mediated through priests and Levites.

As the infant Christ was recognised by Anna and Simeon, a new order was effectively announced. It's in Jesus Christ that we meet God. Christ has become the Temple and takes God and worship outside, beyond the building. Our reading from Acts confirms this new order which was foretold by the prophets 'the Most High does not dwell in houses made by human hands'. Jesus referred to this new understanding when he declared that the temple would be destroyed and in three days he would build another. Reference to his death and resurrection.

The criticisms laid by Jesus before those who were religious leaders was that they had effectively tried to limit people's response to God. Their rituals were strict and excessive. They placed anyone who was Jewish apart from everyone else, declaring that they alone were God's chosen people. Instead, as Simeon declared, Jesus came to save everyone, Jew and Gentile alike, and no ritual or history of birth should take precedence over responses to God's loving purposes.

However the fundamental principle that the Jewish people held, that we are called to be a worshipping community remained – an inheritance for us. Our lives are meant to reflect the devotion of Anna and Simeon. Their lives were centred around the Temple. But they revealed that our focus would Jesus Christ, who became the living temple. But like Simeon and Anna, our lives should also be a liturgy of divine service.

There are numerous different patterns of Christian worship, but they share a common purpose. Fundamentally worship is revelation and response. The 15th century German protestant theologian Martin Luther wrote these words on worship, which seem apt for this choral evensong: "that nothing else be done [in worship] than that our dear Lord Himself

“speak to us through His holy Word and that we, in turn, talk to Him in prayer and song of praise.”

All worship is intended to draw us closer to God, and to one another as brothers and sisters in Christ. Accompanying worship with fellowship, spending time with one another as we will do tonight, builds community. And our new hall here at St Mary’s is an extension of our response to God. The Chronicles reading contains familiar from the communion service: *Yours Lord is the greatness, the power, the splendor and the majesty: for everything on heaven and on earth is yours. All things come from you and of your own do we give you.*

Those words apply to everything we do in this church. From gathering for this beautiful act of worship, to building a new hall, and using it as a gift from God to serve his purposes. And most importantly the words apply to us. We gather to worship tonight as part of a continuing cycle of revelation and response. Our lives are a gift from God and they should be given each and every day back to him by way of loving service, aware that we dare call ourselves the body of Christ, the new and living temple