

Today we give grateful thanks to God for the work of all benefactors since this church was re-opened in 1873. You are rightly proud of the work you have done to restore this impressive church over the past couple of years, and I personally congratulate you all, not only for that work but also for keeping it open in the face of those who wanted to close it. If others knew what a good choir and a high standard of worship you have I am sure they would wish to attend. But have you ever thought about the first 'house of prayer' on which it is based?

When Moses fashioned the sacred chest known as the Ark of the Covenant, he foresaw a wonderful promise of a great future. A promise that this rude beginning, reared in the lonely desert of Sinai, should one day become a focus for all nations. For here was to be the centre for mankind, the only power that could bind men and women together. It would tell them of the mind of their common Father in heaven; and a revealed system of worship would show them how they could respond to his thoughts for them.

That promise is re-emphasised in our Old Testament reading (1 Kings 8.22-30); which is often used at the consecration of buildings. It was to be revealed not in a tented Tabernacle in the desert, but in a glorious Temple. A Temple which, as King Solomon prayed at its dedication, would be a place where not only the prayers of the Israelites would be heard, but also the prayers of foreigners, of strangers, and sojourners. All this indeed came to pass, though not in the manner the King expected. For Solomon's Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians after 586 BC, and re-built on a less magnificent scale as the second Temple in 515 BC. That building was extended and made even more glorious as the third Temple by Herod in 20 BC. This was the Temple Jesus knew, as our second reading (Hebrew 12.18-24) reminds us, and whose destruction in AD 70 he foretold. Yet this site, which is the centre of Judaism, also became a centre for Christianity and for Islam: a major focus for three of the world's great religions. Thus the prophesy of King Solomon came true after all. How amazing is the persistence of 'holy places'! Religions can change but their sites as a focus of Almighty God remain unaltered. What a dramatic and eventful history. King Solomon's Temple, although part of a national centre and glorious in its magnificence, was by modern standards a modest affair; in size perhaps of 60 by 30 feet; not as large as this church. Now all that remains of the holy temple is a small part known as the Wailing Wall where Jews meet weekly to lament its terrible overthrow. Ironically, on the other side of which is a Christian Church dedicated to All Nations.

What went wrong with King Solomon's promise? Well, that which often goes wrong with great visions. Sectional interests and narrow claims built barriers between people, between class and class; between nation and nation. The Jews not only forgot the stranger, they despised him. That despising over the centuries barred the way to the fulfilment of the dreams of Moses and of Solomon's prayer. Now here's the point. Speaking collectively rather than individually: are we any more welcoming to the stranger amongst our neighbours and those whom we meet, than were the Jewish folk of old? Whether the answer is yes or no, can we possibly be even more

welcoming?

The first thing to remember is that we come to church to pray. Oliver Wendell Holmes, a great American writer, was often away from his home church. So, as a stranger in any neighbourhood, Holmes would look for a place where he could say his prayers. He wrote: "I am a regular churchgoer. I shall go for various reasons if I did not love it, but I am fortunate enough to find pleasure in the midst of devout multitudes, whether I can accept all their creed or not. For I find that there is in the corner of my heart 'a little plant of reverence' which wants to be watered about once a week. (What a lovely phrase that is, to define faith and worship: 'a little plant of reverence which wants to be watered'!)

There is no knowing the reason why strangers may find themselves in church with us; but one can be certain that, consciously or unconsciously, he or she is seeking fellowship with God. They have come to pray, however elementary or advanced their approach may be. The one thing that is certain is that God will greet them; as we should. In my extensive travels throughout Asia during my former business life, I was often in places where there was no Anglican church. My weekly worship and prayer has been offered to God in churches of many traditions; and even in buildings of other faiths. Not once have I felt that God has rejected my prayers. As King Solomon said to God just after our reading (v 41-3); "When a stranger who is not of thy people, comes from a far country for thy name's sake ... and prays towards this house, hear thou in heaven ... that they may know that this house which I built is called by thy name".

The second thing to remember is that the visitors are often strangers. The late E.W. Swanton, a cricketing commentator who travelled extensively, once wrote a letter to "The Times" newspaper pleading that churches display more clearly the times of their public worship. He commented: "It seems as if they do not care about strangers coming to their churches". It is a comment I personally find still relevant today for I have more than once in the past few years attended a church only to find the time has been changed without notice. Happily that does not apply here.

I remember many years ago asking a town shopkeeper to display a flower festival poster. She said: "I'll be pleased to display it". Then she burst out: "I would so like to come myself. I'm confirmed but haven't been to church for years; ever since my husband left me. I feel guilty about it and want to, but can't pluck up the courage. Perhaps this will give me the excuse I need".

There is a custom in some rural parts of Germany to leave an empty place at table on Christmas Day. This is to welcome any stranger in case he should be the Lord himself returned to earth. No-one really expects it to happen but it is a nice thought. Well, as the story says, one stormy Christmas night when a family were sitting at the meal table in one of those country homes, a knock was heard at the door. In came a poorly dressed, needy and hungry old man who sat down at the empty place at table. The family were both surprised and disappointed, but they served him

with loving care. When the old man spoke to them they felt there was something attractive about him. But it was not until he got up to leave that they realised what it was – he was the Lord himself!

I wonder how many times the Lord has entered this place – and not been recognised? Perhaps one day he or she will be sitting near you!