

**2023-10-01 ... 6.30pm Evensong Sermon ... Canon William Price**  
**Ezekiel 37: 15 – end; 1 John 2: 22 - end**  
**(Trinity XVII)**

The lessons set for this evening's service don't do much for me. In the first (**Ezekiel, chapter 37, verses 15-end**) the prophet Ezekiel in exile in Babylon foretells a great future for the Jewish people. The kingdoms of Judah and Israel will be united again, and King David will rule over them again in a time of great prosperity and peace. But that never happened. I take from the reading, however, some words which still speak to us today: '**I will be their God and they shall be my people**'.

**The second lesson** from the first letter of St John (**1 John, chapter 2, verses 22-end**) might be summarized as keep faithful to Jesus. The writer expected the end of the world to be imminent, although that hasn't happened either. But again there are words in the lesson for us today: '**Abide in Jesus**'.

Rather than explore those readings further, I want this evening to share some thoughts which I've been mulling over in recent days. **What is this church for? Why go to church?**

On one level this church and every church and chapel exists to be a living fellowship on earth, the members of which should help and encourage, console and cheer, love one another and those outside its membership. This is a very important role in city, town, and village. The social side of the church is very important to the lonely, the shy, and the depressed, as well as to the cheerful, the gregarious, and the happy.

But the church is more than a social service. There is a deeper reason for the church's existence. It is nothing more nor less than the seemingly audacious task of teaching people to know and love God who is all holy and all pure. To know and to love the God who dwells in light inaccessible, God whom we cannot see or hear, God who made the universe and is greater than it. To know God and to make sense of life – of why we are here at all.

Of course the church is not primarily a building. What's left when the building burns down is church. People. Buildings are not necessary. In many parts of the world Christians are persecuted and meet in secret to worship in houses or caves. We can worship God at home or in the open air. I hope that we do. We could sleep in the kitchen or in the garage, but we usually sleep in the bedroom. We can worship anywhere, but it takes experience, just as it would to sleep in the bath.

But although churches are essentially people, rather than buildings, I still love looking at churches and visiting them. It might seem like a busman's holiday for a retired rector, but I can't go past a church without wanting to go inside it. I was in heaven recently in the town of Stamford in Lincolnshire. Six churches, all unlocked within ten minutes of the centre of the town. (My wife was in heaven too, in the pedestrianised High Street with Fat Face, White Stuff, Next, and all manner of temples of retail therapy!) And I'm Vice-Chairman of the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust and I've visited every church in this county and know them all very well. And one of the greatest churches in our county is this one, a sacrament of stone, set at the highest point of this town, a sign to all of our Christian faith.

**PTO**

Our church buildings were built for worship, consecrated and set apart. Here we can deepen our spiritual lives and learn to live in fellowship as the body of Christ. We share worship together, especially at the altar at the Eucharist. We can't do that watching television or on country walks.

There's a lovely prayer which I often say at meetings of the Shropshire Historic Churches Trust:

*'Almighty God, our heavenly Father,  
we remember before you now  
the churches in this county of Shropshire,  
and the houses of worship they use.  
Make the doors of our churches  
wide enough to receive all  
who need human love and fellowship  
and a Father's care.  
And narrow enough to shut out  
all envy, pride and lack of love.  
In them  
may the tempted find help,  
the sorrowing receive comfort,  
the careless be awakened to repentance,  
the penitent be assured of your mercy.  
And there may all your children  
renew their strength  
and go on their way in hope and joy'.*

In worship we can deepen our faith. We can witness to our faith before unbelievers. We can strengthen our faith with others. We can receive the strength of Holy Communion. And this is important because the relationship between God and each one of us is that of Father and child.

Of course you know this. That's why you are here this evening. But perhaps you could invite others to come with you, to find here a consecrated building, a place where prayer has been valid, to find an explanation of what life is – here and hereafter - and in the end to find God, the hidden God, revealed to us in Jesus Christ.

William Price