

THE CHURCH AS A HOUSE OF GOD

Truly the Lord is in this place said Jacob *and I never knew it*. Today, just two days before its patronal feastday and a year after the fire that destroyed its roof, we have the great joy of rededicating this church of St. Thomas More, Hartley Wintney. It now looks more beautiful than ever, thanks to the labours of Fr. Simon and countless members of the parish community. We're so full of gratitude to the many people who have enabled this work. We're also immensely grateful to Canon Mark and the community at St John's C of E for allowing us to celebrate Mass in their church during the breach, a generous ecumenical gesture. So today, full of joy and gratitude to God, we pray for them, and for all whose generosity have helped us refurbish and upgrade this building.

But let me recall Jacob's words in 1stR: *Truly the Lord is in this place. This is nothing less than the house of God and the gate of heaven*. If you follow this Liturgy, I'm sure you will find it rich in meaning. For the dedication of a church to Christ reminds us of our own dedication. In a moment, we'll invoke the saints, our prayers rising to heaven like incense; the church walls will be washed with holy water and the altar anointed with oil, before the candles are lit for the Sacrifice of the Mass. These symbolic actions recall our own initiation into Christ: our baptism, confirmation and First Holy Communion. Indeed in this way, this church and the members of this parish community, are fused together. Just as the building is made of bricks and stones, so, St. Paul said in 2ndR, we are the *living stones* of Christ's Church. Just as the Liturgy in this building makes Christ present to His people, so too it's our task to make Him present to others, proclaiming the Good News to everyone around, especially the poor and the needy. And just as everything must be correctly lined up for the building to stand, so too we, St. Paul urges, must be built on *the apostles and prophets for our foundations with Christ Jesus as our cornerstone*.

We live today in a highly secular, individualised culture, which despite its dazzling achievements is toxic to religion, to Christianity and to traditional values. Secularism has occasioned a crisis of faith that's weakened our church communities, damaged shared values and undermined the concept of objective truth. Few leaders, politicians and policy-makers understand religion, let alone foster it. You might ask: Is rebuilding this church a waste of effort? Just after the Manchester bombing, I was invited to speak at Friday prayers in a mosque in Southampton. I thanked them for the invitation, but even more for being people of religion and faith. For both Christians and Muslims believe in God. We believe that every human being is created, built, hardwired, to know God, to serve Him and to love Him. We're made to worship Him and to find in Him true happiness. Many people today have lost their way, and so it's our task to help people find their way home to Him. This is why it's important to have this Christian church here in Hartley Wintney. It's a reminder that human beings cannot find happiness in life until they find friendship with God.

Let me add one more point. This church is dedicated to St. Thomas More, the great humanist and English statesman, Chancellor of England, executed by Henry VIII in the Tower of London because he refused to take the Oath of Supremacy. In a letter from prison to his daughter Meg, he cited the Gospel we have just heard: *You are the Christ* Peter said *the Son of the living God*. Catholics believe this passage demonstrates the sovereignty of the pope not the government over the Church: *You are Peter and on this rock I will build my Church*. To dedicate a church-building to a saint is to ask the members of the parish to imitate their patron, to become more like her or him. This is why I'd like to ask you not to call this church Hartley Wintney, but St. Thomas More's, a reminder that we should become more like Him, whom here we honour. Nowadays, we will not have to lay down our lives for our ecclesiology, our understanding of the Church. Today's issue is anthropology, what it means to be human and how to gain happiness. As disciples of Jesus Christ, we are witnesses to the Truth Christ teaches about being human. This is why we need to promote in society a healthy dialogue between right reason and faithful religion. For this the true humanist, St. Thomas More, is the ideal patron.

Truly the Lord is in this place. This is nothing less than the house of God and the gate of heaven. Today, the mission of Christianity in Hartley Wintney takes a great leap forward with the resurrection of this church and the community that worships in it. Here Jesus is really, truly present and active among His people. So I ask you to keep this beautiful church open during daytime for prayer! Don't lock Christ away! Don't prevent people coming to Christ! Keep the church open so that people can visit, can find peace and quiet, can meet the Lord Jesus in the Blessed Sacrament of the Altar. Indeed, come and pray here often yourselves. And try to arrange periods of Eucharistic Adoration. In this Mass, we pray that this newly rededicated church might be an effective tool prospering the new evangelisation. May it be for all the *house of God* and the *gate of heaven*. Indeed, through the prayers of St. Thomas More, may it help everyone in Hartley Wintney to find union with Christ, and thus the happiness of heaven for which they long.