

St John's Dedication Festival

Fr John Beiers

Pentecost 21A

Some years ago, I visited an opal mining settlement which was in an isolated area of my parish. It consisted of a scattering of crude shacks along both sides of a small stream. Before I went there, I was told not to ask a lot of questions about the people I met there, but to allow the men to say just as much as they wanted to. Why? Because they will probably take you for a policeman, and most of the men are in hiding from the law, or had a stolen car hidden in the bush nearby. Possibly there might be a murderer or two. Some might be there to actually mine for opals. Play it on the safe side. Therefore, in white shirt with collar crosses (it was too hot for a dog collar) it was with some trepidation that I drove up to the mining camp. I was met with a variety of responses a nod, a dismissive growl, a civil smile – as I went from shack to shack. Hello! Here was a middle-aged man, building up the stone walls, now waist high of– a church, he said! Was it a penance for some past sins, or a vow to be fulfilled? Or what? I dared not ask him whilst we shared a cup of black tea, and he didn't tell me. But why was he doing it? I guessed that, when it was complete, there would only be him patronising the building.

At a very small bush village, there was a man whose wife worshipped regularly in the only church there, but he did not. He said that the only way I would get him inside was in a 6foot long wooden box with the lid nailed down. I said that we could arrange that, and we both smiled. But...he mowed the lawn, repaired the fence, erected a metal archway over a gate that he supplied, topped it off with a golden cross, all of which he made himself. But why? Later, after I left that parish, I heard that he had succumbed to the love of Jesus, and, encased

in a wooden box, was carried into the church he had cared for all his life. But why did he lavish such care on a house of the Lord?

In 170 BC, Antiochus Epiphanes, King of Syria, conquered Jerusalem and desecrated the beautiful Temple. Later Judas Maccabaeus regained control of that city, and one of the first things he did was to cleanse and re-dedicate the House of the Lord with great rejoicing. Why? The answer here is more obvious than in the previous two examples.

The earliest recorded instance of the dedication of a church is that of the cathedral at Tyre (on the coast of Israel) in 314. By the 13th century it had become common usage and involved the Blessing of the exterior and interior of the building itself, and the blessing of the altar and all other interior furnishings for holy use.

A church building is something permanent (or semi-permanent) in the changes and chances of a fleeting world, and represents the existence of an unchanging divine presence – God Almighty! Thus the Tent of the Presence, forerunner of the Jerusalem Temple, was a symbol of God's presence with the Hebrew slave as they fled Egypt led by Moses. At every camping place in the desert, the tent of God was quickly erected to remind the people that God was with them. God did not live in a tent, but He met with Moses there. In the wilderness, the tent silently proclaimed. "Wherever you go, I am with you". Likewise, when ever we found a settlement or village, and built a church, it silently says the same thing. We look at the church and silently thank God that He is with us.

In the first reading today, Solomon causes a building of unsurpassed beauty to be erected as a symbol of God's beauty and His presence amongst His people. However, Solomon clearly points out in verse 27 that God does not live there, because the heaven of heavens itself cannot contain the mighty creator. So, what is the building for? Read verses 28, 29 and

30 for that. Even so many of the Jews regarded it as a dwelling place of God.

When we come to Jesus, He initiates a new kind of house – Himself. He is the *living* foundation stone on which the whole house rests in safety. And He is also that House. When we are baptised into Jesus, we become part of that living house. Isn't that wonderful? The house has a name. It is called church. This building, St. John's, shelters the living Body of Jesus, so it is a place to be cared for and loved.

So now today's gospel reading makes real sense. Our personal cornerstone *has* to be Jesus or we will fall over when the storms of life arise. Be wise. The other parts of the Body surround us, and we need to lean on their support when we find ourselves unable to stand alone.

So it is fitting when we conclude with a prayer of gratitude that we are part of the living Body of Christ, and give thanks for that is ours through the death and resurrection of Our Saviour.

Let us pray:- Bountiful Father, we praise You for this beautiful world You have given us – for the beautiful Body of Christ to which You have called us – for this beautiful house of praise, built by those of faith who have gone before us – for the heritage of prayer that they have bequeathed to us – for the atmosphere of divine love which their prayers here have filled this building like incense. And we pray that, following in their footsteps, we may love and adore you forever. Amen