

3rd Sunday of Lent 2018 Exodus 20: 1-17, John 2: 13-22: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'
May I speak and may we hear in the name of the living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen

So – as I've said, I want to think about temples this morning –

I want to think about this temple in particular.

I want to fill you in on the state of our tower,
and on the state of the building more generally.

I also want to talk about what might be our response to the state in which we find ourselves;
and I want to think about how all this sits in the context of our Christian faith –

How it sits with our faith in Jesus Christ –

Jesus who promises in today's Gospel: 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up'.

Yes, he was talking about his body – but even so.

So what's the state of our building?

Some of you know already that last year

we were told that about £1M of urgent work needed doing to our church building.

That was before we had a survey done on the tower.

That £1M estimate doesn't include the tower work.

The tower survey was done in January

and it revealed that masonry is loose all over the tower.

There's so much loose masonry that a patch up job isn't possible –
holding repairs are not possible.

What is needed is a complete restoration project.

Because masonry might fall – and fall at any moment -

we have had to cordon off the tower.

That's what we were told to do by our architect, by our insurers
and by ECDC building control officers whom I met with on Thursday.

The tower will stay cordoned off
until such time as we've raise the funds
to complete the restoration work.

That work will cost, I'm quite sure,
hundreds of thousands of pounds.

What is worse is that the tower work is not the most urgent work that needs doing.

Attending to loose masonry that might fall from our tower is not the most urgent thing.

Even more urgent is the clearance of gutters and gullies and downpipes all around the outside of this building which are blocked solid with pigeon muck and pigeon nesting material, and the fitting of devices to stop pigeons roosting.

Until this work has been done,

whenever it rains,

water will continue do what it's doing already,

which is seep into the stonework and stay there.

Water can't get out, so it's coming in.

If this seepage continues

there will come a time –

and in fact the time has come already -

when stonework all over the church

will start to crumble away.

If we let that continue

we'll end up having to cordon off the whole place.

The cost of that drainage and pigeon work will be around £50K.

There are blue files next to the noticeboard at the back of church explaining it.

That's why there's a faculty notice on our church door.

The problem – and it is a massive problem - is money.

In our PCC bank account we've got the sum total of £26K to spend on our building.

We have a building/maintenance reserve of £26K,

about £80K in stocks and shares which we must not touch, and we have a piffling amount in other restricted funds.

The drainage and pigeon work will cost, I've said, about £50K,

so even if we spend all our reserve,

which I think we will probably need to do,

We'll still be looking at a £25K shortfall.

I have no idea at this stage where that money will come from –

and we need it now.

Continuing this Lenten theme...

you'll remember we have another money-related problem in this church
and that is the problem of day to day running costs –
the challenge of matching ordinary income and expenditure.

We made some good head-way with that last year.

Our total giving last year went up by about £8K – and that was great. Thank you very much.

But we're still running at a £12K deficit – we've still got a long way to go.

I mention that here because our top priority as a congregation, I think,
is to try to increase our regular giving.

That's what I want us to hear:

before we think about making a donation towards the restoration of this building –
wonderful though donations would be –
we need to think about regular giving –
we need to think about how much we put in the plate.

If your giving needs to stay as it is – that is fine.

But if we could get our regular income and expenditure to balance

That would mean the ongoing worry of funding day to day running costs was behind us,
and that would be real progress.

When it comes to raising funds for the building,
money will come, I hope, from a variety of sources.

Some will come – please God – as individual donations

They might be from us, and they might be from people beyond our congregation.

Some money should come from grants, and some should come – let's hope - from the lottery.

But wherever it comes from, getting that money will be really difficult and really time-consuming.

Getting money from grants and from the Heritage Lottery Fund is not easy:

it will be a specialist operation and it will require massive effort.

We are unlikely to be able to do it without professional help.

The PCC will talk about that on Tuesday.

Our focus as a congregation, as I've said,

is to continue our fundraising efforts for running costs, & to think about giving.

So... How does all this sit in the context of our faith?

It's an amazing thing, isn't it, that those were the set readings for this morning?

When I told our architect the Gospel read 'Destroy this temple and in three days I shall raise it up' he replied, 'Eleanor, if the Lord offers to raise up the temple in three days, I think you should bite his hand off'.

Today's Gospel begins, as we heard, with Christ in the temple.

Christ was in the second temple –

The first temple was built in 586BC under the instruction of King Solomon.

The temple in Jerusalem was more than a building.

That temple was a statement,

just as our church building, I believe, is a statement.

The temple was a statement of the presence and undefeatability of God.

Until the first temple was built,

God's people had nowhere to call home:

God's people were wanderers, they lived in tents, they moved from place to place.

Worse than that, they'd've said, God lived in a tent:

the Ark of the Covenant lived in a tent.

The Ark in which the presence of God dwelt,

the chest containing the two stone tablets on which the 10 Commandments were written –

the 10 Commandments we heard read in our first reading, amazingly -

the Ark was carried around by God's people in a tent.

God's people took it about with them wherever they went.

The temple, when it was built, provided a fitting house for God.

The temple was a statement that God and God's people

had come into their own land –

God's people had moved from transience to permanence.

They had settled in the Promised Land.

Now that first temple was destroyed,

but in 515BC a new temple was completed.

It was from that second temple

that Jesus drove out the money-changers.

The temple was God's house, and the temple was a place of prayer.

The temple contained the Ark, and so it was a place where God was present in a particular way.

A lamp burned in the temple sanctuary, in the place of The Presence, the place where the Ark of the Covenant was.

That's what our sanctuary candle recalls –

the candle that hangs above the safe in the chancel where the reserved sacrament is kept.

The temple was a place of prayer, it was also a place of offering, hence our own offertory today:

the bread, the wine and the money, symbols of all that we have and all that we are

brought as an oblation – an offering - to God.

The temple was also the place where priests offered sacrifices.

Before they offered sacrifice, they washed – they carried out their ritual cleansing.

That's why, just before the Eucharistic Prayer I wash my fingers.

You might want to look up as you're singing our offertory hymn.

As I wash my fingers, I say a prayer:

I pray, 'Lord, wash away my iniquity, and cleanse me from my sin'.

I pray for my cleansing

just as the temple priests prayed for their cleansing, all those years ago.

These gestures – these actions – have been going on in temples and in churches for thousands of years.

They speak of continuity through time.

They speak, I would say, of God's abiding presence.

Some people say – maybe some of you say –

giving attention to buildings

has nothing to do with preaching the Gospel –

nothing to do with what we should be doing.

Other people – maybe the same people –

say caring for a building

has nothing to do with caring for people –

nothing to do with pastoral care.

You'll've already picked up

that I absolutely disagree with that view.

I remember sitting on that front pew
with a man who'd just lost his mother.
He was staring straight ahead, and he told me he used to be a server, when he was a boy.
He told me he'd recorded the sound of our church bells –
that sound that has stayed the same for years and years.
He'd told me he'd played the recording to his mother in the care home.
He said that listening to that recording brought his mother great comfort.

This building, I believe, proclaims a Gospel message in and of itself:
our church building reassures us of God's eternal changelessness when everything else feels in flux.
At least if it isn't falling down.

When it comes to caring for people,
I stood in this church with Alison Fitt and two of Charlie's teachers from SVC four days before Charlie's funeral.
It was during those bouts of heavy rain last summer.

As we stood in the aisle, water poured – and I mean poured - through the roof in 7 different places.
We had to stop our conversation whilst I to rushed to get buckets and bowls and put them all over the pews.
I don't know what I would have done if it had rained on the day of Charlie's funeral.
What would our care for people have looked like then?

So – as we continue through this service
Could I invite you to think about the elements of this service still to come:
think about the offertory – the bringing of all that we have and all that we are to God;
think about my need for cleansing as I wash my fingers, and think about yours;
and think about that great gift of Communion –
think about receiving the best that God has given: the gift of God himself.

And as you receive,
whether you take Communion
or whether you receive a blessing,
could I invite you
to pray that you receive and we all receive
what we need to move forward from where we are.

Pray for us,
and pray for Iain, our architect,
and pray for all who will work with us
in the weeks and months to come.

Pray that we might be enabled,
with God's help,
to raise up this temple.

Though it's going to take longer than three days.

Amen.

Eleanor Whalley
Priest in Charge of Soham and Wicken

If you would like to make a donation towards the tower work, or to St Andrew's Restoration Project more generally, we should be delighted to hear from you. Please either contact Eleanor via 01353 725948 or sohamwickenvicar@gmail.com or send a cheque made payable to **Soham PCC Development Fund** to The New Vicarage, 27 The Oaks, Soham, CB7 5FF. Payment can also be made by electronic transfer to bank sort code **20-29-68** account number **60786128**. Any donation however large or small will be very gratefully received, and if you are willing to Gift Aid it, please let us know your postal address or email address so we can send you a Gift Aid form. Gift Aided donations bring in an extra 25p for every £1 you give, at no extra cost to yourselves. Thank you!