



## The Parish Churches of S Philip and S Augustine and S Matthew with S Mary the Virgin Newcastle

### Homily for SS Simon & Jude's Day (28<sup>th</sup> October) 2024

In the Epistle, the Church is described as a building with the Apostles and Prophets as her foundations. In resorting to this metaphor, the author of the Letter to the Ephesians might well have been resorting to an analogy, which was already prevalent in the theology of the early Church: one of the letters ascribed to Saint Peter speaks in a similar vein, telling the readers that they are like living stones, being built into a spiritual temple; and, of course, Jesus describes Himself as the rejected cornerstone in Saint Matthew's Gospel - an idea cited by Saint Peter in the Book of the Acts of the Apostles.

In part, at least, the purpose of this imagery is to reinforce the understanding that in Christ, the Temple and its cult have had their day; and that under the provisions of the Renewed Covenant, it is the Body of Christ wherein authentic worship is offered; and that, in turn, takes us down an avenue of exploration of what, in the Christian era, is to be counted as authentic worship: not just what we have come to call the Liturgical, but the offering of our hearts and lives in the choices we make in our dealings with one another.

None-the-less, interwoven with this re-aligned conception of worship as rooted in the disposition of our attitudes, there is, of course, the thread of the Eucharist, which even Saint Paul, the earliest of our New Testament witnesses, implicitly concedes is a given of Christian discipleship; and it is the Mass, more than anything else, which holds together the individual stones of the living temple, making of them a single entity rather than a loose association of people with a shared ethical outlook. It is a forlorn exercise to try and prioritise either the ethical or the Liturgical over the other, since the two are mutually dependent. It is, therefore, the Mass and the Presence among us of the risen Christ, revealed in and by the Mass, which makes the Church more than the voluntary association, which the secular world would characterise us as being.

So, the imagery of the living Temple furnishes us with an almost paradoxical image: on the one hand, the stability and permanence of a stone edifice, whilst, on the other hand, a living developing organism.

Of course, even permanent stone edifices are not always the unchanging phenomena they might seem to be at any given moment. They are extended, adapted to new needs and situations and, of course, they are restored if they endure for a long time.

A while ago, I was watching a fly-on-the-wall programme about the life of Westminster Abbey. At one point, the architect and the clerk of works abseiled down one of the towers at the West end of the church and found a decaying stone, which they decided needed to be removed and replaced. I was glad that I did not have to take responsibility for such decisions and actions, since I would crumble under the angst of imagining the whole thing collapsing.

The Church, too, needs restoration from time to time - what we often call reform. Yet, it can be a delicate task. Even if it is straightforward identifying the decay - and I am not sure that is always the case - working out how to remove the dilapidation and replace it - and with what - is a much more challenging task if we are not to bring the whole edifice crashing down.

In these turbulent times, we need to tread carefully as we seek to restore and adapt the Church to our changing world, recognising that the most attractive options, let alone the easiest ones, might not be those that will serve us well in the longer term.