

November 9 St John Lateran

Today the Church celebrates the dedication of a church: the Cathedral of Rome dedicated to the Beloved Disciple, Saint John. This cathedral was built by the emperor Constantine in 324AD, just after he declared Christianity a lawful religion within the Empire. The end of State persecution meant that, for the first time, Christians could worship in public churches, rather than in catacombs and private houses in secret. The Lateran Basilica is still the cathedral of the Christian community in Rome and for a thousand years it was the residence of the Pope, who now, as you know, lives in the Vatican State, across the Tiber and outside the walls of the ancient city.

From the earliest times, Rome and its bishop have held a special place in the hearts of Christians. This is partly geographical - Rome being the centre of the Empire within which Christianity took root. More importantly, it is because the Christian community of Rome suffered such terrible persecution and gave such an example of heroic faith. Peter and Paul were among its martyrs. The Lateran Basilica of Saint John was the first public church in the symbolic heart of the Church. It has been called, therefore, the 'mother of all churches'. In effect, today, throughout the Catholic church, every diocese is celebrating its link with the community and bishop of Rome. Indeed every parish is celebrating its life as the family of God. It is a fitting occasion to look at ourselves and at our church, the spiritual home of our community family.

The Responsorial Psalm chosen for the liturgy celebrates God's presence in Jerusalem, firstly as an impregnable citadel giving protection, and secondly as a river, giving life. While God is present in his temple, the forces of evil cannot conquer it and God's faithful people can always find protection and refuge within it. That is what we are meant to find here: a place where Jesus dwells among us, where we can always find him waiting to listen to us and to give himself to us in communion; a place where our souls can find rest and our broken hearts can be healed. The tabernacle is a symbol of this. The sanctuary lamp assures us that he who is the light of the world has pitched his tent here among us as we journey together to the Promised Land.

The Psalmist pictures the forces of chaos hurling themselves against God's people in an attempt to reduce to chaos the work of the Creator. He assures us that they cannot succeed. The darkness cannot extinguish the light. I am reminded of a poem by James McAuley called 'In a late hour' [Slightly adapted]:

Though everyone desert you my faith shall not grow less,
but keep that single virtue of simple thankfulness.
Pursuit had closed around me, terrors had pressed me low;
you sought me and you found me, and I will not let you go.
The human heart grows colder, the final things draw near.
Forms vanish, kingdoms moulder, the antirealm is here
whose order is derangement: close-driven, yet alone,
we reach the last estrangement, the sense of nature gone.
Though the stars run distracted, and from wounds deep rancours flow,
while the mystery is enacted I will not let you go.

A second image in the psalm is that of a river bringing joy to the city. The reference is to the Gihon Spring in the Kedron valley, the source of Jerusalem's water. Ezekiel in the First Reading speaks of the water that is taken from the Pool of Siloam (fed by the Gihon spring) and poured over the altar in the temple. From the right side of the temple the water of grace flows through the city. We think of the water that flowed from the pierced heart of Jesus as he hung on the cross. We think also of the words of the Beloved Disciple, John: 'Out of his heart will flow rivers of living water'(John 7:38).

It is here, in the church, that we receive so many of the sacraments that nourish and heal our souls. It is here that we are received into the community at Baptism. It is here that some have received the anointing of the Spirit of Jesus in confirmation. At the Eucharist, we are drawn by grace to the hill of Calvary where we look on the one whom we have pierced and receive love and life from his pierced heart. It is here that we come to receive Jesus into our hearts in Holy Communion. It is here that we come to Reconciliation and it is here that we come to celebrate, at the heart of the community, the sacrament of married love.

As we celebrate with gratitude and love our communion with the Christian community of Rome and so with the other thousand million Catholic Christians throughout the world, we thank God for this our local community and for the miracles of grace that constantly happen here. May the fire of love from the heart of Jesus capture our own hearts, and may we have the courage to take it out into our neighbourhood, that the 'Sacred Heart of Jesus may be everywhere loved'. May our Mother, Mary, who was at the heart of the Pentecost community, guide us towards Jesus and show us how to be his disciples.