

Over the summer months there are many visitors who come to Ireland. Among these are visitors who come from North America, from Australia and New Zealand. Many come not only to visit the areas their forebears grew up in but also to discover something about their ancestors, who they were, what their background was. There is a search for identity beyond what they work at, the money they earn, the car they drive.

Over these past few weeks in our readings from the Old Testament we have been following the story of David, his anointing by Samuel, his defeat of Goliath, his rise to power despite all efforts of Saul to eliminate him, his bringing together of all the tribes of Israel into a single Kingdom. David, born to be a shepherd boy, grew up to be King of Israel, probably the greatest King Israel ever had, one from whom, Jesus was destined to be descended.

In our Lesson this morning we find David now established in his capital, living in a place that befitted his status as King. Conscious that, while he lived in a palace, the Ark of God, symbolising the presence of God with his people, continued to be housed in a tent as it had during the time of wandering in the wilderness, the King shares with the prophet Nathan his desire to build a Temple as a more fitting place to house the Ark of God.

Nathan's first reaction is to say do what you feel is right. But that night Nathan feels God telling him to tell David to hold back, that this is not the right time. Before a Temple was to be built, the Lord would first establish the community. Before the house of the Lord is built, the house of David will first be established.

This links in with the closing words of the passage we read from the Letter to the Ephesians

<sup>22</sup>in whom you also are built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God. *Eph 2:22*

This underlines what we know to be true – that when we speak of the Church, we speak first of the community and only then on the building in which that community meets.

I think back to when I was in Kildare Diocese. At that time there was a radical look at the number of buildings we had in use at that time. This involved a careful consideration of what was the nature of the Church. There was one particular area just south of Mountmellick, around Durrow in Leighlin Diocese, where an area served by two Roman Catholic Churches was served by five Church of Ireland Churches. When the history of those particular buildings was looked at it was realised that many had their origins in a fashion by owners of big houses to each build private chapels for their families and their Church of Ireland workers – there was an element of one upmanship.

With demise of the big house, for both political and economic reasons, we were left with buildings without communities – to be frank some of them never had real communities even when they were built. We also had a distortion of spirituality in which the preservation of a particular building became more important than the worship that was offered in that building.

What is at issue here is the whole matter of identity and where we find that identity. This is the same issue at stake in whether David was to build the Temple at that particular point in time. For buildings, even our most beautiful and impressive buildings can, if we allow them, distort rather than enhance our spiritual pilgrimage. Take the Temple itself; even in its ruins you can see it must have been a magnificent building. Many years after it was finally built by Solomon, Jewish spiritual life became a shadow of what it was intended to be. When the city was besieged and surrounded by enemies, the people assumed because of the physical presence of the Temple, God would never allow the city to be captured. At that time Ezekiel had his vision of the glory of God leaving the Temple and departing the city. In the eyes of the people the Temple had become the focus of their identity rather than a faithfulness to the God who was worshipped there. The people had to go through the painful experience of the Exile to rediscover their identity as the People of God.

We are now preparing to celebrate the 150<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Consecration of our Parish Church and the 200<sup>th</sup> Anniversary of the Church that was on this site beforehand, the tower of which is incorporated into St Mary's. We are very conscious that we are remembering not just the building of this Church but also the community that has worshipped here over the years. This building is held in great affection and as we restore the roof we are preserving this building for use by future generations. But as I remind every confirmation group, this building is not the Church. The Church is the community that meets here for worship. Or as Bishop Noel Willoughby once said in General Synod, 'The Church is what is left when the building has fallen down.' As so as we prepare a history of our Parish we are compiling not just a history of this building but

of the people who have made this Parish what it is – so we are looking for photographs, for stories, for memorabilia – so that we can tell the story of who we are as a community.

As we prepare to move forward the Vestry are in the process of having a look at how we use this building into the future. So prior to work beginning on the roof we are beginning a process of trying out a few things. The choir now comes down here for Family Services and that has worked well. Over the last number of weeks we have tried roping off some of the pews to draw us closer together in our worship. Our hymn singing has definitely benefitted. At present, there is a huge gap between me at the communion table and the first of the pews that have people sitting in them – so we will be moving the Communion Table further forward to a point level with the pulpit for a while – the idea is we gather around the table rather than watch what is going on at the table. We are not looking for an immediate reaction. There is nothing set in stone – let us just see how it feels over a period of time.

I go back to the fundamental truth that the Church here is the community that gathers around this place; this Church of St Mary which has been the place where people have worshipped, have celebrated family occasions, where they have come to seek solace in times of loss. How can this building continue to serve the community that is the Church in this place as we move into the future?