

What is a temple?
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The Meeting of the Lord
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In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit, one God, Amen.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, what is a *temple*? What do you understand by this term? What can we learn and so enter more fully into this present feast?

Modern society tries to “explain” ancient religions as “beliefs made up to explain what their science could not understand.” This is not, however, how the ancient world believed. The ancients understood that there is a spiritual world, something which is beyond matter, beyond the physical. And within this spiritual realm they encountered beings whom they worshipped. So the ancients made temples in honour of these beings, these gods. But that was not enough, to have merely a building in the god’s honour: within the temple the god had to be trapped. This was usually done by it being imprisoned in a statue but occasionally by it possessing a person, such as the Oracle at Delphi where a priestess would be possessed by the spirit of Apollo. Once trapped, the god could be manipulated into doing what the worshippers wanted by offering sacrifices to it.

Is this, dear brothers and sisters, our view of Church? Is *this* the place where we have housed – trapped – the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob? Is he here to do our bidding by offering our sacrifices to him? Have we transformed Christianity into a pagan religion?

It is into this world that Abraham and his descendants arose worshipping their God. This would not have caused a problem to the Canaanite peoples among whom they lived – it was common for a tribe to have its own god. Yet the children of Israel were different, they believed that their God was over and above all gods. They did not deny their existence – of El or Baal, Atum or Ra, Cronus or Zeus, Saturn or Jupiter – but held that their God had ultimate power and authority.

Eventually, at the time of King Solomon, Israel would build the Temple for God in Jerusalem. By the time of Christ this had been destroyed and rebuilt by King Herod the Great. But the temple for the Jews was different from pagan temples: it was not a place to go to gain power over a god, a place where God is trapped in; it was a place where sacrifice could be offered because of sins so that the people would remain holy – literally set apart from all other peoples as the people chosen by God. Yet, dear brothers and sisters, this was an ongoing process: the Jews would continually sin and sacrifices would continually be offered. The high priest, we are told by the Apostle Paul a little after today’s reading from the Epistle to the Hebrews, needed daily “to offer up sacrifices, first for his own sins and then for the people’s” – a demanding task.

And, amid all these sacrifices, under oppression of foreign rulers, a poor family brought their newborn son to the Temple. We know they were poor: the Law requires they bring a year-old lamb and a pigeon or dove, yet allows for a poor family to bring two turtledoves or pigeons instead. They came to the temple not to direct God to act in a certain way but to offer sacrifices to the living God, against sin, that they may be holy.

Do you, dear brothers and sisters in Christ, strive for holiness? Do I? Do we set following God’s will above all our concerns? Are our prayers, our fastings, our work and family lives, directed at

the one thing needful? Or are we asking God for money, clothes or jobs? We have a God who offers us the Kingdom, do we ask for petty and transient toys?

This family came in obedience to the Law of Moses, they brought their sacrifices. Yet this was different from every other family, for here the Lord himself comes to meet his people. The Law-giver is obedient to the Law, as he tells us,

Do not think that I came to destroy the Law or the Prophets. I did not come to destroy but to fulfil. For assuredly, I say to you, till heaven and earth pass away, one jot or one tittle will by no means pass from the law till all is fulfilled.

The Lord enters his Temple, and there he is recognised. St Simeon the God-receiver recognises the one who will save the people. “Well is he called righteous,” says St Ambrose of Milan about St Simeon, “who sought not his own good, but the good of his nation, as it follows, ‘Waiting for the consolation of Israel.’”

St Simeon and St Anna receive Christ at an advanced age. We see here an image of the change in priesthood, for while the sacrifices in the Temple would continue for some seven decades, they have ceased their meaning. The Lord has come to dwell among his people and the sacrifices can stop, the priesthood of Levi can stop, because a new priesthood has come, one which will not abandon the Law of Moses but fulfil it and extend it to the whole of humanity, not now a nation of physical descent from Abraham but of a spiritual descent from him for all nations, all peoples. Not a priesthood offering *daily* sacrifices but a priesthood of *one* sacrifice on the Cross. The Apostle tells us in today’s reading,

Now if perfection had been attainable through the Levitical priesthood (for under it the people received the law), what further need would there have been for another priest to arise after the order of Melchizedek, rather than one named after the order of Aaron? For when there is a change in the priesthood, there is necessarily a change in the law as well.

The aged Simeon and Anna, along with the aged priesthood of Levi, will soon die as the new priesthood, the Order of Melchizedek with Jesus Christ as the High Priest, has come. Yet the old priesthood has one final gift to give, the *Nunc Dimittis*, the prayer “Lord now lettest thou thy servant depart in peace.” This prayer is the culmination of all the hopes and desires of Israel for the coming Messiah. It is a prayer we repeat in the Church every day at Vespers and it expresses our desire for a departure from this life in the hope of the Resurrection.

So, my dear brothers and sisters in Christ, this present feast reveals to us the revelation of God to his people, the passing away of the old priesthood for the new, and is the culmination of the entire Nativity cycle. And yet, and yet I started with a question, “What is a temple?” We have hinted at the answer — it is a place of sacrifice, a place of purification, a place of holiness — but we should go deeper. The Theotokos, the blessed Virgin, as for so much, is our guide. Christ the God-man is our perfect example in all things, yet when we seek guidance from one who is *only* human we can look to no one more than the Theotokos.

The Theotokos, when she in complete freedom, replied to the Archangel, "Behold the maidservant of the Lord! Let it be to me according to your word," became the Ark which contains not the Tablets of the Law but the one who gave the Law, she became the living Temple of the Lord. She carried the Creator: heaven cannot contain God yet she did – the Church speaks of this poetically when we say her "womb became greater than the heavens." In this feast the living Temple enters the Temple of stone and all is transformed. The Temple of God, though, is not limited to one: in the Liturgy today Communion will be offered to all who have prepared. Elsewhere from today's reading, the Apostle tells the Corinthian Church,

For you are the temple of the living God. As God has said:

"I will dwell in them
And walk among them.
I will be their God,
And they shall be My people."

Therefore

"Come out from among them
And be separate, says the Lord.
Do not touch what is unclean,
And I will receive you."
"I will be a Father to you,
And you shall be My sons and daughters,
Says the Lord Almighty."

To you and to me is offered to become temples of God, for in Christ our temple is not stone, brick, wood nor even concrete. We respect our Church buildings, we care for them as the place where we come together to glorify God, yet the temple is most perfect not in a statue made in the image of a god, but a human person made in the image and after the likeness of God. Not in an inanimate object in which a god is trapped but in a heart where the living God is, in all freedom, invited.

My dear brothers and sisters in Christ, the Lord calls us to holiness, to being his temples. The Lord calls each one of us to be his presence in our homes, our workplaces, our schools, colleges and universities; the Lord calls us to be temples which cannot be destroyed but will be raised up on the Last Day. Take up this calling, be a place of sacrifice in service to others, be a place where the human heart is purified by becoming more like Christ, be a place which is set aside for holiness. Seek the help of each other, the Church – temples of God – that we may carry each other's burdens and come closer to the Lord.

That we may glorify the Father, together with his only-begotten Son and All-holy, Good and Life-giving Spirit. Amen.