

The temple in Jerusalem in which Jesus was presented on this day was originally founded by the great kings David and Solomon in the 900s BC. For the Jews of this period, the temple in Jerusalem was the centre of the earth. This was the place where human beings came into direct encounter with God. The immensely complicated liturgy and rituals of the temple celebrated and re-enacted all that God had done in the creation of the world, in the redemption of his people.

The Jews of the Old Testament period saw the temple as representing the whole creation in miniature. Its courtyard represented the pagans; its Holy area the Jewish people and then the Holy of Holies (what we would think of as the sanctuary) represented heaven itself: the garden of Eden restored and renewed. Sacrifices regularly offered in the temple would renew not just those who brought them along but the whole creation.

When you went to the temple in Jerusalem, you were not just a tourist. You could expect it to change you. The sacrificial system of the temple was there to transform you and make you share the life of the angels; the life of God himself.

The temple suffered a chequered fate over the years. Destroyed and rebuilt on a couple of occasions in its history, it was finally destroyed by the Romans in 70AD, never to be rebuilt again. All you can see of it now is the wailing or western wall in Jerusalem, where Jews still go to pray. After the destruction of the temple, Jewish worship took place only in the meeting places or synagogues.

Now, until recently, it was assumed that Christian worship was based on the worship not of the temple but of the synagogue: the smaller Jewish meeting places, where there was and is no sacrifices and where things are more informal. This meant that when people think of early Christian worship, they often imagine something like a modern house church: a few people sitting around in a sitting room and having a Bible study together and then perhaps deciding to break some bread and drink some wine. They assumed that grand liturgies came later.

But that view is now being challenged. In an exciting development for Catholic Christians, modern historians and biblical scholars have pointed

out the striking way in which the early liturgies in Christian worship reflected not synagogue worship, but the worship of the temple. The proof of this can be found in many of the texts of early services, early liturgies which very consciously pick up the imagery of the temple. They suggest that when the early Christians celebrated the Eucharist, far from sitting round rooms informally, they built meeting spaces, designed vestments, wrote liturgies and selected psalms that were directly modelled on temple worship.

Why did they do this? Well, the clue is in the New Testament itself. Jesus talks of destroying the temple and rebuilding it in three days. And the gospel writer tells us that 'he was speaking of the temple of his body'. In other words, the body of Jesus is the new temple that is to be rebuilt. And what is the body of Jesus? Well, says St Paul, the body of Christ is the Church. So the Church, the body of Christ is the temple. So, the early Christians saw themselves as the new temple.

So what does all of that mean for us today? Three things...

First of all, let's not be embarrassed about the way we worship because it actually expresses who we are as Christians, members of the body of Christ, the new temple. Thus, it is perfectly right that elements of the worship of the temple have always found their way directly into Christian worship. So, it's quite natural that, among others, the following things were in use in the temple should still be used in Old St Martin's today: vestments, the altar, the language of sacrifice, the sanctuary, incense, the priesthood, processions, psalms and so on and so on. These things are not add ons, but express what Christians truly are and take us right back to our biblical roots in the temple.

Secondly, when we come to worship, let's be confident that what we'll have is a direct encounter with God. That's what the temple was about. It wasn't a place to have a discussion about God or to think about him in a sort of abstract way. Rather, when you went to the temple, you actually expected to meet the Lord in the liturgy, the ritual and the sacrifice. And, because the Church is the new temple, that's what happens in the Catholic liturgy as well. We don't just talk about God or remember him, but we look

for him actually to be present in word and sacrament so that we can truly see and know him. I'm glad that, since I've been here, I've found a very strong sense of that.

Thirdly and finally, let's expect that the worship of the Church change people. The worship of the temple was expected, as I said earlier, to transform those who were present at it. When they were there, they shared the life of the angels and were transported to the presence of God, their lives were changed and they knew that they wouldn't be the same again after they left. Let's have faith that real change can and does happen here, not just to the bread and wine of the eucharist, but to us who partake in it. Let's have faith that everyone who enters here, including ourselves will be transformed. Let's have faith that each of our lives, frail, fragile and broken though they are, can be caught up into the life of the living God who deigns to be present in his temple today, and yet reigns on high from his cherubim throne.