

DEDICATION OF ST MICHAEL & ALL ANGELS',  
ABINGDON

25 January 2026



1 Kings 8.22–30 / Hebrews 12.18–24 / Matthew 21.12–16

You have not come to something that can be touched...

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit – *Amen*

ONCE UPON A TIME there was a pandemic (difficult as it now seems to believe, it was only six years ago), and in order to minimise the risk of transmitting the virus among members of a congregation, the Archbishop of Canterbury (as then was) *forbade* parish clergy from holding services in their churches. Indeed, he forbade them *entering* their churches, even for as safe and spiritually edifying a purpose as webcasting services, so that congregants could participate in services by observing familiar clergy performing familiar rituals in a familiar space.

At the time, the Archbishop and his supporters leaned heavily on the slogan that ‘the church isn’t the *building*, it’s the *people*.’ He made a particular point of this principle by leading worship from his kitchen, if I recall correctly. On one hand, that expresses a sound biblical understanding of how the people of God are constituted — not by the street address, not by the configuration of the shelter where they assemble, not by rock or bricks or wood or adobe, not by steel and glass, but by God’s call to gather in his Name. So far, so good. But the ecclesioclasts, the opponents of church-based worship, artfully ignored the overwhelming evidence, from Genesis to Revelation, that our God invites worship at particular *times*, in particular *places*, with exquisitely *decorated furnishings*. Nor does this come only on God’s side of our worship: The majesty of

Stonehenge, Gobekli Tepe, Uluru, Adam's Peak *reminds* us that well before Abraham quit his day job at his father-in-law's business and followed his calling to go west, people had been seeking closer communion with their gods in special places, and reminds us that we often have added consecrated buildings to the natural features of spiritually significant locations.

Now, before you leap to any conclusions, permit me to affirm that I've led *wonderful* services in a school gymnasium, and even in the disused two-car garage of a suburban detached house. Though these worship spaces were adopted out of necessity, and both congregations had their eyes on eventually raising enough money to raise bespoke churches, each had its own kind of spiritual charm. The gymnasium had great acoustics, it was brilliantly accessible for anyone who needs mobility support, and enough space that people (with children, for example) could remove themselves from the thick of the Mass without absenting themselves altogether. And the garage reminded us every week of the humble shed we associate with Jesus's birth, and with the workshop where St Joseph toiled. We remembered that whatever else a church may be, it should always be a *home* for God's people, the *house* of God, a house *of prayer* for all people. Nobody started out with a pot brimful of donations and said, 'Right, now we have to find, or perhaps even build for ourselves, a gymnasium so that we can praise God among netball hoops and gymnastic horses. Maybe if we don't find a suitable gym, we can obtain a house with a large garage!' We worship in unpropitious places out of necessity, and find therein unexpected blessings; but we do not *seek out* unexpected blessings by *choosing* ill-fitting spaces. We do not worship in kitchens because that represents our ideal, but because we have been forbidden entry to the places where our hearts rise, unbidden, to the heights of adoration.

No, we who love God and long to draw ever nearer to our heavenly mansions ask our architects and masons, our woodcarvers, painters, and

glaziers to contribute with each stone, each slate, each peg, each pane to touching our deepest desires and raising them heavenward, purifying them and offering them to our Saviour and Judge adorned with the graces imparted by the beauty of holiness within which we gather. The church is the people, not the building, but the people have built and gathered at the building, and by heaven *this* is where we set forth our prayers as incense, and the lifting up of our hands as the evening sacrifice.

So it is very meet, right, and our bounden duty to gather this morning in thanksgiving for our forebears who built this lovely testimony to God's glory in brick and glass and wood and stone. We must not shy away from being house-proud in the house of the Lord; we would be *perverse* to hide the light of this sanctuary under a bushel of informality. While I imagine that the Bishop's Palace at Lambeth has a terrific kitchen — I'd be shocked if it didn't — I don't think that very many people lined up and paid 12 quid to go have a look 'round Archbishop Welby's kitchen the way they queue to tour St Paul's or Westminster Abbey or churches all over the nation. I don't think that most of the people who stand or sit in that kitchen catch their breath and marvel at the majesty of God's creation brought to light by human craft and labour. I don't think that anybody wakes up Sunday morning and says, 'Right, where shall we go for Sunday worship? What about somebody's kitchen?' (I don't mean to be having a go at kitchens, which are one of my favourite rooms in any house, second only to a library or whatever room has the most bookshelves.) The church may be the people, but a church *building* heightens the people's chief end of glorifying God, and of enjoying him forever. Our building provides us with what we might call a *prosthetic heaven*, with representations of Our Lady, of saints and of course St Michael and All Angels, and of the throne of glory, all flooding our imagination with intimations of divinity, humble reminders of a magnificence we can't begin to anticipate.

When we celebrate the Dedication of the Church of St Michael and

All Angels, we recall the generations of the faithful who have come here before us; indeed, we recall the generations who gathered at St Nicolas's and St Helen's, the sister churches whose congregations ultimately populated these walls. When we make our way from our homes to the South Porch or the North Door, we echo the journey of pilgrims to Walsingham, to Canterbury, to Rome, and above all to Jerusalem. We come from all over Abingdon to Albert Park, as once God's holy people came to Mount Zion; in the Spirit, we come to the Temple, to St Peter's Basilica, to St Paul's Cathedral — but most truly, here in this church, at St Michael and All Angels, *we come home*.

And this home is no new build; St Michael and All Angels harks back 160 years to the heyday of the Oxford Movement, to the expansion of the gospel through the towns and villages of England, to the mission of St Augustine of Canterbury, to Rome, to Constantinople, to Jerusalem, to the tabernacle in the wilderness — and it projects us *forward* to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, and to St Michael and innumerable angels in festal gathering, and to the assembly of the firstborn who are enrolled in heaven, and to God the judge of all, and to the spirits of the righteous *made perfect*, and to Jesus, the mediator of a new covenant; to a temple that extends north and east and west and south that extends back through to times past and stretches forward to *eternities* to come, a church not made with hands, for in our earthly gathering today at the church of St Michael and All Angels, we proclaim our faith in our eternal home, a city whose temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb.

✠ In the Name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit —

**Amen**