

## **DEDICATION OF ST BENEDICT'S CHURCH, GILLINGHAM 9<sup>TH</sup> DECEMBER 2025**

### **HOMILY OF BISHOP NICHOLAS HUDSON**

We have a rich liturgy to savour this afternoon. One witnesses occasionally the dedication of an altar. It's very rare to witness the dedication of a whole church.

You will have noticed that it all began with water – because it is, of course, through water that we first enter the Church. The Rite affirms that blessing ourselves with water is a reminder of our baptism – and also a sign of our repentance. From the outset, we're called to repent of our sins. That's because taking part in the Rite of dedicating a church is also an act of rededication of ourselves.

Zacchaeus's story is a wonderful encouragement. Here's a man who was spurned for his avarice. Yet, with Jesus's coming to his house, he is transformed. He resolves to give half of his goods to the poor; and, if he's defrauded anyone, to restore it fourfold. Zacchaeus encourages us to believe that it's never too late to repent of our sin – until it's too late, of course.

You may have noticed that, in this Rite, the Scriptures are prefaced by the Bishop praying that the Word of God *achieve our salvation*. It recalls that phrase we sometimes use to describe Scripture - as "the saving Word of God". That phrase affirms our belief, a belief shared by Christians of all denominations, that the Word of God itself has saving power.

St Paul confirms this when he says, "the Word of God is alive and active. It cuts more finely than any double-edged sword." So, if on hearing Zacchaeus's story, you resolve to share more of your plenty with the poor, then this Word has been for you a saving Word too, guiding and helping towards your salvation.

We rededicate ourselves through repentance then. We rededicate ourselves also through prayer. Advent is a wonderful time to deepen our prayer. In Advent we anticipate a triple coming: the coming of Our Lord at the end of time to take all things to himself; his coming at the end of our lives to call us home; his coming to us in our everyday lives. Again, Jesus's encounter with Zacchaeus is a reminder and encouragement to us. His words to Zacchaeus, "I must stay at your house today", we should hear addressed to us too – as an invitation to make a home for Jesus in our hearts, to let him more deeply into our lives.

At this time of year, we rejoice in the name given to Jesus by Isaiah - of 'Emmanuel' – a name which Luke confirms to mean, "God is with us". So we can say that, in dedicating this church, we honour and recognise Emmanuel: we recognise that "God is with us". In rededicating ourselves, we celebrate our belief that God is not just in this place but that he makes his

home in the hearts of each one of us. As we prepare this place for worship, prepare the altar for the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass, enthrone the Blessed Sacrament in the tabernacle, we affirm our belief that God is truly with us; this newly dedicated church announces “God’s presence” to all the people of Gillingham and round about.

In view of this, Jesus’s other words about making his home in us, as recorded by John, also resonate deeply within us – when he tells his disciples, “Make your home in me.” “Make your home in me as I make mine in you.” We understand his making his home in us. As our hearts focus, these days of Advent, on Bethlehem, we look back with joy to his making his home among us 2025 years ago. But he calls to us from Bethlehem also to make our home in him. How so? Well, I’d like to suggest it’s principally through prayer: through deepening our prayer; and also reflecting on our baptism. So we make a link back to the water with which we were blessed at the start of today’s liturgy. If we’re wondering how to deepen our these days of Advent, we may wish to reflect on the promises which we made or which were made on our behalf at Baptism – both to be his followers and also to announce to others our belief that “God is with us”, that he is intimately with us and waits for us to invite him into our lives; and in that way rededicate ourselves to him.

Thoughts such as these help amplify in our hearts what Paul also says today to the Corinthians and to us – when twice he tells us, “you are God’s temple”. “Do you not know,” he asks, “that you are God’s temple and that God’s spirit dwells in you?” My prayer for all of us who are here present tonight is that this church, this temple, which we dedicate might serve always as a reminder to us that the temple of God is to be found not just at St Benedict’s, in Gillingham High Street, but in our very souls; that we nurture, honour, respect the temple God has built within us; and let part of our repentance be sorrow for any ways in which we’ve failed to respect the temple which we are, failed to respect the temple which others are.

It is interesting to note, lastly, what Paul also has to say about the foundations upon which this temple of which he speaks is laid. “I laid a foundation,” he tells us, “and someone else is building upon it.” Paul’s words should give us pause – pause to reflect on whose foundations we *build* this church today. The story of this parish is beautifully captured in the foreword to our Order of Service. It encourages us to think right back to the beginnings of the Marnhull Mission in 1725; of how the cottage was transformed into the chapel which became St Benedict’s church in Cemetery Road; to the discernment under Bishop Mark that the Methodist church here might better serve a community which had shifted in its centre of gravity towards Gillingham.

All who’ve been part of that long and distinguished journey, Catholic, Methodist, Anglican, I’m sure, and others, we surely hold in our prayer tonight. And my hope is that the ecumenical story this church represents be an incentive to rededicate ourselves to deepening our ecumenical witness to and with our Christian brothers and sisters here in Gillingham.

Soon our focus will shift to the altar. There we will place, inside the altar, certain relics including a relic of Pope St Gregory the Great. He was, of course, a monk in the tradition of St Benedict. What both were about, what they achieved and what they stood for gives eloquent expression to all that we're about this afternoon. Benedict is rightly considered the founder of Western monasticism. And at the heart of that tradition is hospitality – a sort of double hospitality: to make a home in our hearts for God, a home in our hearts for the stranger. Paul's plea - to "make hospitality your special care" - finds a deep resonance in the tradition born of Benedict.

As I say, St Gregory the Great was himself a son of Benedict. But what the insertion of his relic signifies for us most powerfully is mission – our mission. Because it was Gregory who sent on a mission to England the holy monk Augustine, who did so much to build up the struggling faith of Christians in the South-East. A phrase which captures eloquently their shared contribution to all that we are about this evening is the phrase, "Communion is for Mission".

Benedict, Gregory, and Augustine were all about communion. As monks, communion with Christ through prayer was their *raison d'être*. But so also was mission – namely, drawing others into relationship with Him. Communion and mission are surely what we are about today too. We honour and venerate this church, most especially its altar, as a sign and signal of our unshakeable belief that Christ is with us in this place; that when we celebrate the Holy Sacrifice of the Mass we are united with him on Calvary; that he feeds us with his Body and Blood; that we have Communion with him. And we remember that he left us an enduring Mission – the great Commission, to go out into the world and baptise; that Communion is never to be sought as an end in itself but is rather to be understood as feeding us in order that we might feed others, bring them into relationship with him.

So it is that we can say Communion is for Mission. It is to this that we rededicate ourselves this day. My hope and prayer as we proceed now with the full dedication of this church is that in St Benedict's – and in all of us who take part in today's solemn dedication - will be realised those striking words we find on the lips of the Prophet Zephaniah – that people will look at you and all you are about in this church and say, "We wish to go with you – because we see that God is with you." "We wish to go with you – because we see that God is with you."

9 December 2025