

A CHURCH THAT ABIDES, BEARS FRUIT, AND GIVES THANKS

55th Anniversary of the English Church Heidelberg

1 Kings 8:22–30 • Psalm 84 • 1 Corinthians 3:9–17 • John 15:1–17

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Today is a joyful day of thanksgiving. We celebrate the 55th Anniversary of the English Church Heidelberg. Above all, we give thanks to God for His faithfulness through the years and for all those whom He has called to build, nurture and sustain this congregation. It is a particular blessing that our foundress, Mary Holmes, is able to celebrate this anniversary with us today. As we give thanks for our shared history, we also give thanks that we can celebrate God's faithfulness together with someone who was there at the beginning.

Our first reading tells us about King Solomon dedicating the Temple. It was a great and joyful occasion. Yet Solomon knew that even the Temple could never contain God. He prayed, 'Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you.' God's presence is never confined to a building. Wherever His people gather in faith, there God is present.

The Collect for today reminds us of the true purpose of every church anniversary. We thank God for all the blessings He has given to those who worship in this place, and we pray that all who seek Him here may truly find Him. More than that, we pray that, filled with the Holy Spirit, we ourselves may become a living temple acceptable to God. Every church anniversary is not simply about remembering the past or celebrating a building. It is about renewing our calling to become the living people of God.

Many of us come from different countries, cultures and backgrounds, yet God has gathered us into one family. For many of us, this congregation has become a spiritual home far away from home. The Psalm declares, 'How

lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord of hosts!' One of God's greatest gifts is not simply finding a place to live, but finding a church family. I believe many of us have found that gift here in Heidelberg.

Saint Paul reminds us that we are God's building. The Church is never built by one person alone. Every generation receives the gift from those who came before and faithfully passes it on to those who follow. Mary Holmes helped plant the seeds of this congregation. Others nurtured them through the years. Others carried the ministry through changing times. Today, that same responsibility has been entrusted to us. We are not only caretakers of the past; we are builders for the future.

For many years, I preached on today's Gospel back home in the Philippines. I spoke about Jesus as the true Vine, yet I had never actually seen a vineyard with my own eyes. Only after coming to Germany did I begin to understand this image in a new way. Travelling through this beautiful region and seeing vineyards stretching across the hillsides, watching how carefully the vines are tended throughout the seasons, this Gospel suddenly became much more real to me.

A branch has no life of its own. It cannot survive or bear fruit unless it remains connected to the vine. Everything depends on remaining connected to the vine. That is why Jesus says, 'I am the vine; you are the branches.' This is not only a picture of our personal faith. It is also a picture of the Church. Our life comes not from our history, traditions or numbers, but from Christ alone. As long as we remain in Him, His life flows into us, His love shapes us, His grace strengthens us and His Spirit enables us to bear fruit.

Perhaps that is the most important message for us today. The future of this congregation will never depend simply on how long it has existed or how many people gather here each Sunday. Its future depends on whether we continue to abide in Christ. Jesus promises, 'Those who abide in me and I in them bear much fruit.'

When I look around today, I believe I already see that fruit. I see people from many nations worshipping together. I see friendships across cultures. I see generosity, hospitality and faithful service. These are the fruits that truly matter, and they are signs that Christ continues to live and work among us.

So today is not only a day to look back with gratitude. It is also a day to look forward with hope. May this church always remain a welcoming home for newcomers. May it continue to proclaim Christ faithfully. May it remain a place where people discover hope, friendship and the love of God. May all who seek God in this place truly find Him, and may this congregation continue to be a living temple filled with His Holy Spirit. May those who come after us one day give thanks for this generation, just as we today give thanks for those who came before us.

Finally, let me say this. One of God's greatest blessings is not only to begin something worthwhile, but also to witness how God continues His work through faithful people across many generations. Today we thank God for our foundress, Mary Holmes, and for every priest, churchwarden, council member, volunteer and faithful worshipper who has helped shape this community. Now it is our turn. May we remain united to Christ, the true Vine. May we continue to love one another. May we bear fruit that will last. And may everything we do bring glory, not to ourselves, but to our Lord Jesus Christ, the true foundation and life of His Church. To Him be all honour, glory and praise, now and for ever. Amen.