

<i>Date Preached</i>	14-Aug-2022	<i>Date Initiated</i>	26-Jul-2022
<i>Where Preached</i>	SAK	<i>Appointed Readings</i>	Feast of Ded'n, All Yrs

" [W]e pray that all who seek you here may find you, and be filled with your joy and peace. "



An excerpt from the 1957 "Brief History of St Andrew's Church" (p 22):

Plans were now made for the consecration [of the church building]. Bishop Brownell set a date for the service – August 29, 1827. We have no record of the service, but the form [of liturgy] in use then is still found in our current Prayer Book. We can imagine the joy and thankfulness with which the rector and the people joined in heart as the bishop read the solemn words. ... The old church had been called St John's, but the new was consecrated by the name of St Andrew's

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The dedication of a new cathedral or church—also sometimes known as its consecration—has taken many different forms and signified many different things over the three thousand years since King Solomon effusively (and lavishly: the feasting and celebration extended for seven whole days!¹) dedicated the First Temple in Jerusalem. For centuries, no church could be dedicated unless some relic of a saint—from an entire limb down to a fingernail paring—was deposited there. And over time, the ceremonies grew more and more elaborate. In one, the bishop wrote, with the end of his crozier, the complete Greek and the Latin alphabets in sand that had been scattered all over the floor of the nave. During some periods, a church building could not be used for sacred worship until it had been dedicated. Indeed, to this day, in the Church of England, no building is legally a "church," even if it's been used as one for decades, unless a bishop has consecrated it.²

Given all of this historical flux and swirl, it's a little surprising that in the Episcopal Church, the rite for dedicating a church building has remained much the same over two-and-a-half centuries. The outline of the liturgy Bp Brownell presided over in 1827³ closely tracks, in both content and aspiration, the dedication rite in our current *Book of Common Prayer* (pp 566ff).

At the heart of today's dedication rite is a three-fold Prayer for Consecration (pp 568-69) that is prayed by a bishop, a lay person and a priest, respectively. ¶First, the bishop prays to the Father that this building be used to praise God's name; to ask God's forgiveness; to know God's healing; to hear God's Word; and to nourish God's people *via* the Body and Blood of God's Son. ¶Next, a warden prays to Jesus that whenever we seek God in this place, we may find comfort and

¹ 1 Kings 8:65.

² In the Episcopal Church, until as recently as 1979, no church building could be dedicated until all mortgages had been retired and the property held free and clear.

³ As Charles Henry Web, the author of the parish history notes, in 1957, the rite had not changed much from the original form approved by the Church's General Convention in 1799. In it, the bishop prays for the setting apart of the building for hallowed use: for reading the holy Word; celebrating the Sacraments; offering prayers of praise and thanksgiving; blessing people in God's Name. The bishop further prays that God attend to baptisms, confirmations, communions, offices, marriages and other worshipful actions that will occur "in this place." (*See Book of Common Prayer (1928)*, pp 564-66.)

wisdom; may be supported and strengthened; may rejoice and give thanks; and may be made one with Christ *and* with one another. ¶Finally, the priest prays to the Holy Spirit to be in this place as new members are added to God's household; as we grow in grace, over the years; as we are joined in marriage; as we turn to God in sickness and need; and, finally, when we are committed into God's hands at the end of our mortal lives.

It is a beautiful, devotional and even *vocational* prayer. It *calls* us to know this building as the place we come to, to dwell in the sacraments ... to touch, taste and receive the ever-present but always-invisible grace of God: in Baptism and Confirmation, in Eucharist, in Confession, in Marriage and in the laying-on of hands.⁴ It also marks ... perhaps even *anoints* ... the church building as our principal place to encounter Christ: to experience His comfort and support ... to worship and be made one with Him: the church as the chief-est place to meet our life's chief-est, and dearest, companion. And the Prayer for Consecration sets this building aside as the place in which to hallow all the moments and seasons of our lives: to make holy all our TO-ing-and-FRO-ing: our birth, our growth and development ... our marrying, our loving, our ailing, our suffering ... and, at the last, our death—which is to say, our resurrection, in Christ.

This is the place ... *this*: these walls, these windows, this floor, this ceiling, these pews, this Altar and Font, this Ambo and organ ... *this* is the place—the *physical, concrete, material* place—that both encapsulates and emanates all our hope, all our faith and all our love, as followers of Christ.

It is commonly said—and truly so—that the Church is not a building but, rather, its gathered people.⁵ But in our Prayer for Consecration ... and on anniversaries like the one we celebrate today ... we not only reminisce, but also are reminded of the singularity and unsurpassability of our church building as a place *both* that is constituted *by God*⁶; *and* that is made *for God's people*: to find Christ when we're seeking; to gather in Christ when we've been baptized; to worship Christ when we've heard His Word; and to serve Christ when we've been fed.

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In the traditional Roman Catholic liturgy, it is (or, at least, *used to be*) customary to sing the Latin motet *Locus iste* at the anniversary of the dedication of a church building. (There is a truly ethereal setting by Bruckner that I *highly* recommend, if you've never heard it.) Drawing from the stories of Jacob's ladder and Moses and the burning bush, the first two lines of the motet, in English, are: THIS PLACE WAS MADE BY GOD, [AND IS] A SACRAMENT BEYOND ALL WORTH. The church building—bricks and stones, glass and wood, cables and pipes—as a sacrament⁷: It's a notion both powerful and sublime. The church ... *this* church ... as the place where we can always, readily and reliably, find Christ. As the place in which we receive Christ's grace, stand in Christ's glory and unite in Christ's love, over and over and over again. As the place to be filled—to be fed, to be healed, to be

⁴ I refer, if obliquely, to both the rite of Reconciliation (confession) and of Ordination. Each involves the laying-on of hands.

⁵ As one hymn (that I was unaware of until writing this sermon) puts it: "The church is not a building; the church is not a steeple; the church is not a resting place; the church is a people."

⁶ *I.e.*, not physically, but ritually and sacramentally and spiritually. That said, no doubt, the human design, fundraising, construction and furnishing of many a church—perhaps even ours, let us hope!—are blessed and guided by the presence and work of the Holy Spirit.

⁷ Just for clarity: Our Church teaches only seven Sacraments, and you will not find an edifice among them! I interpret the motet's text as an implication (or, perhaps, a suggestion or calling) to consider the church building to be *like* a sacrament.

forgiven, to be joined, to be set apart—by Christ and then sent forth into the world, once more, to do His precious, life-giving work.⁸

Is this not the church—*any* church? Is this not the church—*this* church? *our* church? And, by God's grace, may it continue **so to be**, for at least *another* 195 years! Alleluia!



*The Rev Douglas S Worthington
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*Blessing:
Christ, whose glory is in the heavens,
fill this house and illuminate your hearts;
and the blessing of God almighty, ...*

⁸ I note Archbishop of Canterbury Justin Welby's words at the closing keynote at the recently concluded Lambeth Conference of Bishops: "The church united is not merely a help to the world; it is the sign of salvation to the transformation of the world. The church humbled and hospitable, generous and full of love, is not just a nice thing to have in society; it points to the kingdom of heaven." The Archbishop was speaking, of course, about the Church as the Body of Christ, not about buildings. But, I think, his words sweep in the symbolic idea that our church buildings, situated as they are in the midst of 'modern life,' can convey to all, as well.