

Marble Cathedral Centenary

August 10, 2025

Nelson Cathedral

Introduction:

Today as we commemorate 100 years of our Marble Cathedral, I would like to take you back in time:

- Not to 100 years ago when the foundation stone for this Cathedral was laid.
- Not back to 1851 when the first wooden church was built.
- Or even back to August 1842 when Bp Selwyn pitched a tent and held a service 183 years ago.

I want to take us back several thousand years, to when bits of the Old Testament were written.

Back then people had a different way of understanding what it meant for something to “exist”. In our world, we focus on what something is made of – what I would call

its **form**, whereas in ancient times people focused on its **function** - its purpose for existing.

- To illustrate, let’s consider the collection of buildings just down the road. There is a big building for gathering, some grassy areas with picnic tables, two-story buildings divided into smaller rooms with whiteboards, desks and chairs. Driving past, we recognise this place as a “school” because of the shape and style of the buildings and grounds – we focus on what it is made of.
- But in ancient times, a school would not exist because of the buildings, but only once the students and the teachers were there. A school exists as a place of learning, and that occurs when the people for whom it was made inhabit it.

Liminal space

As we celebrate the building of this marble Cathedral, I think this distinction between form and function is helpful, as we consider what this building means to us.

Beginning with our understanding of form, Cathedrals more than any other buildings are designed to be special places. As one author put it, they are “Ships of Heaven”, places that transport us away from our regular world, and draw us closer to the spiritual through their size, architecture, windows, art and music.

Cathedrals are thresholds between two realities, places where heaven and earth meet, and places where new possibilities can be found.

This is certainly the case when people come into this space and comment on the sense of peace they experience here, no matter what draws them in.

Today we give thanks that Nelson Cathedral is the iconic building of Nelson with such a prominent position

on Piki Mai in the heart of our city. It just would not feel right to have Nelson without the view up Trafalgar Street, to the Cawthron steps and up to the Cathedral. All surrounded by the beauty of Piki Mai. In this scene, our eyes are literally lifted up to heaven.

Living stones

But even more important than the physical form of our Cathedral is its function, which I would like to reflect on using our reading from St Paul’s letter to the Ephesians (2:19-22).

The central image in these verses is the great Temple in Jerusalem, understood as the very dwelling place of God. This building, situated on a hill, was the religious heart of the nation, a place of pilgrimage, but also the political, social, musical and cultural heart of the city. That sounds very familiar doesn’t it, even though we do not consider Cathedrals to be Temples.

Before our reading from Ephesians, Paul described God's people as a new family – God's household - united together because Jesus, through his death and resurrection, destroyed the barriers that separate us from God and from each other.

Now Paul changes the metaphor and describes God's family as a house, made up of the "holy ones" joined together - a new temple.

Just as our Cathedral is made up of stones joined together, this new spiritual building is made up of human beings – living stones. You might say **we are God's lego** - all different shapes and sizes and colours but joined and united together as one, to form a living building, a new spiritual temple.

Therefore, the dwelling place of God is no longer a physical building made of stone or even marble, but it is now you and I, the people of God. Through faith in Jesus, we are the place where God dwells, we are the

new temple, and we are still God's temple when we walk out of here and into the world.

Application

This imagery of a living temple, does not diminish the importance of the Cathedral as a sacred place where God's presence can be found and experienced.

1. But it does remind us that it is God's people that give the Cathedral its meaning and purpose; those who have gone before us, us here and now; and those to whom we will leave our legacy in the future.

As we commemorate the laying of the foundation stone of this marble Cathedral, Paul reminds us that the true cornerstone, the stone of highest honour, the load bearing stone that holds the building together and determines the shape of the building is Jesus Christ.

It is his life, work and continuing presence that makes our life with God possible because we are, built on, and exist in Him.

And as our foundation stone reminds us, this building and its people, exist to “the glory of God” as the spiritual heart of our Diocese and city, a beacon of hope on Piki Mai for all to experience and be part of. A sign that God is near in the lives of his people and for all to come near receive his love.

2. Paul also mentions the teachings of the Apostles and Prophets because their words to us in the Bible point to the revelation of who Jesus is. We are an apostolic church, where Scripture is at our heart because Scripture points us to Jesus.

And so, we are reminded that this Cathedral is a place to build our relationship with Jesus, through

worship, through the reading of Scripture and through prayer which forms our spiritual heart.

3. And celebrating 100 years of our marble Cathedral reminds us what it means to be the people in whom God dwells, as we go out into our community.

Our Gospel reading outlined what is often called the “double love command”; to love God and to love our neighbour. This is what it means to be a living temple as we grow together in our love for Jesus, and when we show that love for each other and our neighbours.

As Arch Bp William Temple famously said, “the Church is the only organisation that exists for the benefit of those who are not currently members”. Therefore, this Cathedral and its people are open to all.

Conclusion

I will finish with this brief story.

A man came upon a construction site where three people were working.

- *He asked the first, “What are you doing?” and the person replied: “I am laying bricks.”*
- *He asked the second, “What are you doing?” and the person replied: “I am building a wall.”*
- *As he approached the third, he heard them humming a tune as they worked, and asked, “What are you doing?” The person stood, looked up at the sky, and smiled, “I am building a cathedral!”*

As we commemorate 100 years of our magnificent marble Cathedral we give thanks for its form – the marble, the arches, the acoustics which draw us to heaven.

But a Cathedral is more than the sum of its parts. As the spiritual heart of Diocese and City, our Cathedral has a higher purpose in forming its people and our community, living stones who know and share the love of God.

Amen.