In the early 1980s, a statue of Christ outside the church of Christ the King in San Diego was damaged by vandals who broke off its hands. Instead of repairing the statue, the church decided to put up a sign at its base which reads simply ‘I have no hands but yours.’ It’s a reference to a prayer by St Teresa of Avila which begins:

*Christ has no body now, but yours.  
No hands, no feet on earth, but yours.  
Yours are the eyes through which Christ looks with compassion into the world.  
Yours are the feet with which Christ walks to do good.  
Yours are the hands with which Christ blesses the world.*

I don’t know about you, but this is one of those truths about how God interacts with his world which I find distinctly uncomfortable. Wouldn’t it be so much easier if he would just make his will happen by clicking his divine fingers? But no. However much we may want him to get on with it and take direct action, his preferred way of bringing about what he wants to happen in his world is in partnership – partnership with the likes of you and me.

This is, I think, the main challenge for us today of the little book ‘Fire in Coventry’. It tells the story of what happened around the Diocese of Coventry in the lead-up to the consecration of the new Cathedral in May 1962 and reflects on what it was that the Spirit was saying to the churches. It focuses on the realisation that, as members of churches across Coventry and Warwickshire came to see, ‘...what God wanted was not just a consecrated Cathedral, but a consecrated people living round it’.

It’s easy to say – but what does it mean? What do ‘consecrated people’ look like? And what does it take to become one?

These are questions which it’s good for each generation to ask afresh. As Bishop Christopher writes in his introduction to the new edition of this book published a couple of years ago: This “...is much more than a record of the past. It is a story of permanent relevance because it uncovers some of the deepest characteristics of the life of the Church and of the great mystery of divine and human interplay as God breaks into the affairs of the world with a particular intensity.”

To explore this further, I’d like us to take a closer look at the passage we heard earlier as our first reading. Here’s the basic idea: Consecrated people are on fire for God. Consecrated people are those who are utterly and completely at God’s disposal. Consecrated people are those in and through whom Jesus makes his presence and power known in the world. Consecrated people are those who, in partnership with one another, make up the living and active body of Christ today. Consecrated people are those who for whom love, prayer and the Holy Spirit – “the three who dance together and are one at the heart of the Church” – are primary and for whom all else is secondary.

One of the rather endearing things about the apostle Paul is that he can sometimes get distracted. That certainly seems to be what’s going on at the end of chapter 2 and the beginning of chapter 3. The way the NIV sets it out makes it clearer, I think, by showing that verses 2-13 of chapter 3 are a bit of a digression. In verse 1 of chapter 3 he begins to introduce ‘For this reason I...’. Then he goes off on his detour and doesn’t come back to where he was until verse 14 with ‘For this reason I bow my knees before the Father...’ So for what reason? Not what he has just been saying but for what follows on from the end of chapter 2.

Here’s the truth which Paul wants them to grasp. He prays for them because they are being “built together spiritually into a dwelling-place for God”. Or, as the NIV translates it, you “are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit”.

Now of course, in one sense, God doesn’t actually need a home because he is everywhere at once. As he points out to Jeremiah (23:24): “Do not I fill heaven and earth?” But there are some places where God is more at home than others. There are some places where he actively dwells, where he makes his presence felt in a special way, where he is, as it were, comfortable. And that’s what the church is intended to be: ‘a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit’.

We need to be clear, by the way, that we’re not talking about church buildings. God doesn’t choose to dwell within these four walls in a way that he doesn’t choose to dwell within any other set of four walls.

Picture Solomon, dedicating the magnificent temple he had built for God using the materials gathered by his father David. What more majestic place could God have chosen? What better address could he have? But Solomon knows the true position. [2 Chronicles 6:18:] “…will God really dwell on earth with men? The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!”

The apostle Paul puts it even more succinctly as he addresses the Athenians in Acts 17:24: ‘The God who made the world and everything in it is the Lord of heaven and earth and does not live in temples built by hands.’

So there we are. To think that God does live in buildings like this is to have far too small a view of who he is. No, the significant thing about a church is not its buildings but its people. Indeed, we can go so far as to say that, from God’s point of view, if an empty church building were to fall down, then what he sees as the real church would be completely unscathed. The church is what is left over when the building disappears. A building is useful, certainly, but not if it leads us to think of ‘church’ in a way which differs from that of the Bible.

So then, we the people are his temple. As we meet together this morning, we are where God delights to dwell. And so – here’s the question... How can we ensure that God, as it were, feels more ‘at home’ among us? What give him pleasure? What is, if you like, the divine equivalent of ‘slippers by the fire’? This is what Paul focuses on in his prayer in Ephesians chapter 3...

First, we notice the one to whom Paul is praying. Ephesians 3:14-15: ‘For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name.’ The Greek word for Father is ‘pater’ while the word for family is ‘patria’. Why are we called a ‘patria’, a family? Because of our relationship to God our Father. This is the reality with which Paul begins. The fact that we can call God ‘Father’ has some very practical implications.

Children are born with and grow up to develop the characteristics of their parents, don’t they? Hence the cooings of relatives and friends over new babies, ‘Oh, he’s got your ears’ and so on. The thing is that what is true of our earthly parents physically is intended also to be true of our heavenly Father spiritually.

And so this is what we affirm whenever we address God as ‘Father’: the deep sense of purpose we’ve been given of becoming more like him. To be in Christ is to have been born again, born of the Spirit. Increasingly, therefore, we should be developing our heavenly Father’s characteristics, as the life of the Spirit grows stronger in us and the life of our sinful nature begins to take more of a back seat.

So secondly, we notice that this is exactly what Paul goes on to pray for in verse 16: ‘I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit’

There are three factors at work here. First, there is God’s desire that we should be like him. But then secondly, as we think about our lives, we become aware of the enormous difficulties and barriers which are in the way of this happening. For our inner being is naturally weak. Sin causes us to be almost entirely unlike God. We need therefore to be strengthened. And so, thirdly, having introduced us to God’s desire, Paul now talks about God’s power. He is not only willing but also able. He has the resources to bring about what would otherwise be quite impossible. That’s why Paul prays that he will answer his prayer ‘according to the riches of his glory’.

To what end? What is this power of the Spirit for? The answer is in verse 17: ‘...so that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith’. The word ‘dwell’ is a good one here. Paul had two words to choose from. You might say, ‘I went to Manchester for the weekend and I decided to stay at the Britannia Hotel’. That’s one word. Or you might say ‘I’ve bought a cottage in Somerset and when I move from here I’m going to stay there for good’. That’s the other word. Here, talking about Christ dwelling or staying our hearts, Paul uses the second one. There’s a sense of
permanent settling down, not just staying for a weekend. A sense of real belonging rather than taking up temporary residence.

Jesus hasn’t come to stay in our lives in the way that we stay at a hotel. He’s come to put down roots. And that has important implications. You see, if you stay at a hotel in Manchester, you’re very unlikely to visit Homebase or B&Q are you? You wouldn’t dream of redecorating your hotel bedroom. You might not like it but that wouldn’t matter. You’d be coming home after the weekend and never have to go back. And anyway, it’s not your hotel to redecorate. But if you’d bought a cottage in Somerset then you might well want to make a few changes. You probably would visit the local DIY shops. And you’d be entirely justified in doing so. The property is yours.

This is what the Spirit does. We are not like an hotel to whom Jesus comes as a visitor and leaves much as he find it when he goes. To be a Christian is to invite him to come in and take over. He promises to stay. We are his home. And so he has the right to make changes.

When I was first ordained, I lived very happily on the third floor of a rather ancient block of flats. But I was without my piano, which had to be kept in the church vestry. The reason for this had to do with the fact that the floors of the flat sloped in towards the centre of the rooms. It was rather alarming. Drawers could open all by themselves, for example. To haul my piano all the way up the stairs to my flat could well have been a waste of time – since it would very probably have gone straight back down again through the ceilings of the flats beneath! At the end of the day, there was nothing I could do about it. The flat didn’t belong to me. And, because I didn’t have my piano with me, there was a sense in which I never really dwelt there. I liked living there, but I was never completely at home.

But our lives are not to be like that as far as Jesus is concerned. When we become Christians, we hand ownership of our lives over to him. And when we do that, he, as it were, sends round his Spirit to see what needs to be done. To check out, for example, where the floors need to be strengthened. And then to do the work so that, increasingly, Jesus will feel at home. Piano and all! This is how we become holy and blameless. This is how we begin to measure up to becoming more like God intends us to be: as Christ lives his life in and through us by the power of his Spirit.

Now what in particular does this mean? In what ways might our lives need to be strengthened? Paul latches on to the most important aspect in the next stage of his prayer. From the second half of verse 17: ‘that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge...’

The key is love – mentioned three times in these verses. Love is the environment in which our spiritual life grows and flourishes. The goal is that we make real the love of God to others. Above everything else, that’s what it means to reflect the family likeness. But how does it come about. How do we love?

The answer is that we pass on what we have already been given. Like a mirror receives and reflects light, so we receive and reflect love. This is why Paul prays that his readers may be rooted and established in love. That the love of God may be the soil in which they flourish, the bedrock on which their lives are built. That they will begin to grasp something of the dimensions of Christ’s love. How broad, how long, how high, how deep. Broad enough to encompass all people everywhere. Long enough to last for all time. High enough to lift us to heaven. Deep enough to rescue us from hell. Paul wants his readers to know the love that surpasses knowledge. This is how they will come to the measure of all the fulness of God.

It’s all a pretty tall order, to put it mildly. But Paul knows that the One to whom he prays is both willing and able. Look at how he expresses it here in verse 20: ‘Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine...’ There are seven stages here. 1) First, God is able. 2) Secondly, God is able to do what we can put into words and ask. 3) Thirdly, he is also able to do what we can’t put into words but only imagine. 4) Fourthly, he is able to do all that we can ask or imagine. 5) Fifthly, he is able to do more than all we ask or imagine. 6) Sixthly, he is able to do far more than all we ask or imagine. 7) Finally, he is able to do abundantly or immeasurably far more than all we can ask or imagine. The word for abundantly more is made up of three Greek words, hyper-ek-perissou, stuck together to make a super-superlative.

How? ...’by the power that is at work within us’. The wiring is, at it were, already installed. All we have to is plug in and switch on. Or, to change the analogy slightly, the pipework is already there. All we have to do is turn on the taps.
Step by step, to put into practice what we already know and what we continue to discover together to be his will for us – in the daily dance of love, prayer and the Holy Spirit.

No wonder Paul ends as he does in verse 21: ‘to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen. Yes. May those bringing glory to God include us and our generation. Amen indeed!