Sermon for 16th in Ordinary Year B

Or Church Anniversary

Readings: 2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:53-56.

David was sitting proudly in his brand new palace one day and got a sudden pang of conscience that God was still living in a tent. At least, the symbol of God’s presence was still in the tent, the covenant box containing the stone tables with the 10 commandments.

Nathan the prophet initially saw promise in David’s suggestion – what priest or minister has ever turned down a new church from a philanthropist king or industrial magnate? But God told Nathan otherwise, and to his credit, he faithfully returned to David to tell him to forget the whole scheme. God has called it off.

Yet the matter does not rest there; for God has promised that one day in the future David will get all he hopes for and much more beside:

* There will be a temple and it will be built by one of David’s sons.
* This son will also be known as God’s Son.
* This Son will be “raised up’ by God, which in both Greek and Hebrew versions of the OT use the same word as “resurrect”.
* The dynasty this son establishes will last forever.

Well the world didn’t have to wait long for the temple after all. It was built a few years later by Solomon, David’s son, in the very next generation.

This is typical. It’s like a reflex action. All religions seem to feel impelled to set up their own sacred space, their own place of meeting with symbolic architecture that encapsulates the essence of their faith. This has happened since primitive people met under sacred trees – and it’s still as powerful today as any Methodist standing under the oak at Fort Frederica in Georgia where Whitfield and Charles Wesley used to preach will be able to attest.

It has happened ever since Jacob set up his standing stones and called it Bethel, or people have built their temples, gudwaras, pegodas, mosques or synagogues. Even the least organised group, the Quakers, feel the need for their Meeting House. It’s natural. It’s pretty universal. **But is it what God was talking about to David?**

It all rests on a pun on the word “house.” David was living in a nice house so he felt obliged to build God a nice house too. But “house” is not just a physical structure for human habitation. House can also mean “The House of Tudor” or the “House of Burgundy” – so house can also mean dynasty or lineage.

It is this latter interpretation that struck the apostles when they read this passage in the light of knowing Jesus. Jesus was David’s son, but he was also known as God’s Son who foretold the destruction of the physical temple in Jerusalem and had established himself as a new dynasty or lineage that would last forever, based on the ‘new temple’ which was his body.

To the first Christians, it seemed that the glory of God – which was the traditional way Jews spoke about the presence of God on earth – had departed the physical temple and been transferred to the living temple, Jesus Christ that God had erected in Zion through the resurrection. After the physical Jewish temple had been destroyed in the Jewish-Roman war in AD70, the idea of God having transferred his glory, in a manner that an admiral might move his flag from a crippled ship to another, took firm hold in Christian thinking.

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The new metaphorical temple of Christ’s lineage is as symbolically structured as the physical one. In the Jerusalem temple there was a huge dividing wall between Jews and gentile believers. Even within the one faith, the fundamental division between the Jews, God’s Chosen People, and the rest of the world persisted. Even gentile God-fearers could only approach God so far and no farther.

But in the ‘new temple’ of Christ’s body, Jew and gentile meet as equals. Everyone who is baptised into Christ becomes part of this one nation for all the earth. As we hear today in the reading from Ephesians 2:

For [Christ] is our peace, who has made the two one and has destroyed the barrier, the dividing wall of hostility…Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and aliens, but fellow citizens with God’s people and members of God’s household (Eph 2:14,19).

Such a seismic shift in Jewish understanding that had defined their nation since the days of Abraham was a monumental change of heart and mind for those first Jewish believers who had become Christians. It is no wonder Paul had to fight to defend this revolution – and why even Peter wobbled for a while between Paul’s “Christ for everyone” agenda and James’ “Christ for the Jews and anybody willing to be circumcised like a Jew and accept the Torah” agenda.

What helped Paul win the battle and open up the Church to all people?

1. The inclusive LOGIC within the OT story of God’s creating, redeeming love that finds occasional expression in Isaiah of Babylon or the Book of Jonah, despite the “God for the Jews” idea that is so prevalent. God called a special people into being through Abraham not for their own sake alone, but as the instrument through which God would save the whole world.

2. Paul and the other apostles knew the precedent Jesus had set. In Mark 6:53-56, which is set in what was known as “Galilee of the gentiles” because of its high non-Jewish population, Jesus heals without worrying if they are Jew or gentile. Just to be in need is the only qualification.

Elsewhere we see Jesus feeding the 4,000 gentiles with 7 loaves and fish collecting 7 baskets of scraps which symbolises perfection, or completeness, to mirror the feeding of the 5,000 strong Jewish multitude which is symbolic of the 5 Books of Moses after which 12 baskets of scraps were collected to symbolise the 12 tribes of Israel. We also see Jesus curing the Syro-Phoenician woman’s daughter beyond Israel in the region of Tyre and Sidon, whilst elsewhere he commends the faith of a centurion and meets with visiting Greeks.

3. Finally, the inclusive approach of Paul was vindicated by the Holy Spirit. As Peter commented when he saw that Cornelius the Roman officer of the Italian Regiment had received the Holy Spirit: “I now realize that it is true that God treats everyone on the same basis. Whoever worships him and does what is right is acceptable to him, no matter what race he belongs to” (Acts 10:34-35).

iii

However, the same instinct to build a sacred building has persisted among the Christians as much as in anyone else before or since. Christians may have known from the beginning that Jesus was more interested in building a “house” in the sense of establishing a never-ending lineage of faithful Christians, but that has not prevented Christians becoming as obsessed about buildings as their Jewish predecessors.

Too many Christians have spent too long and too much on prestigious building programmes at the expense of their prime focus of ministry to people. Buildings should exist to facilitate and express mission, and never become the object of mission and faith itself.

Methodists have been no different to anyone else in erecting buildings to support and express their cause. In May 1738 Wesley felt his heart “strangely warmed”. By 1739 Methodism had its first chapel building, the New Rooms in Bristol.

And ever since, like all other Christian groups, we have struggled to remember at all times that the Church is first and foremost the people and not the building. Some have responded that we should therefore sell off all our buildings.

I see that as neither possible nor advisable. Sacred spaces matter; they always have and always will. Physical buildings symbolise the presence, purpose and beliefs of a believing community. They are a silent proclamation, for good or for ill depending on the state of the building, in every street where they are found. The design of the building speaks of the faith of those who worship there, with spire and steeple, or altar, font and pew, organ, keyboard or data-projector.

And physical buildings are sacramental. They do what they are designed to do. A good church building evokes a spiritual response from us, makes us feel closer to God simply by entering, before we have said a prayer or sung a hymn.

But let us not forget that even the mightiest cathedral, basilica or abbey will not necessarily stand forever, but the Church of Christ, the living temple of his people shall endure, as Charles Wesley’s hymn puts it:

See the gospel-church secure,

And founded on a Rock!

All her promises are sure;

Her bulwarks who can shock?

**Rev Dr Trevor Hoggard**

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