

2 Samuel 7: 1-9, 12-13 or Exodus 19: 16-25

Why Building Projects?

Michael has told me what to say, so I won't be detaining you for long. However, I've allowed myself a few detours.

First, congratulations. Beautiful. It takes immense effort to persevere with a vision.

I reckon that for every year of a building project, PCC's, Churchwardens and Vicars age at least 5. So, well done that team and well done that supporting congregation.

Question is – what next?

Back tracking before we answer that question, let's consider why we bother *at all* with the pain of a building project? It would be easier to leave things well alone. So, why go there?

Going back to the beginning, it has always been important, in fact utterly necessary, to have a place set aside to meet with God. A place separate from ordinary living spaces. A place outside the camp. A place consecrated for the worship of God.

There was *the* mountain and a tent of meeting in the Sinai wilderness. Then, when existence became more settled, the tabernacle was created – a stepped up tent with bespoke fittings and fixtures and made-to-measure furnishings.

Later still, built by Solomon, King's David's son, the first Temple appears in Jerusalem. Note that the reason why this task is given to Solomon, is because David has too much blood on his hands. He had been a warrior king, establishing the nation through conquest. Solomon, was more of an administrator cum business entrepreneur. God is concerned that his House has the right foundations. Some churches with troubled foundations do sometimes seem to lack peace. More on that at another time.

Solomon's Temple is destroyed centuries later as the Israelites are forced into exile and eventually, a rebuilding project is conceived by the prophet Nehemiah who was moved to tears on seeing the rubble of Jerusalem. Nehemiah feels the stabbing call to begin rebuilding the wall of Jerusalem and the Temple itself. No easy job. He is beset from threats without and threats within (foreign invasion and internal factionalism) - to the extent that scripture tells us that the workers are instructed to hold a trowel in one hand and a dagger in the other.

Why do I mention the above, because there can be no lasting relationship with anyone, even the LORD God, unless we have a meeting place. We need a place where we have chosen to meet with God. Lack of place to meet often leads to dissipation. This is exactly why we have churches. Meeting outside around a stone cross was ok for a bit in summer, but during the winter months was probably a soggy experience. Someone, somewhere in medieval England decided that Girton should have a church. Someone, somewhere felt a call to establish one. The work you have completed in Girton not only honours God, but honours those early pioneer Christians who built churches like this one without a JCB in sight.

A place to meet with God is important. It reminds us that we worship a holy and transcendent God. In Exodus, the people are warned: "Take care not to go up the mountain or to touch the foot of it", (19: 12). It is easy to trivialise God and make that which is holy into something to be dispensed with ease. God is not a thing and is to be approached with awe and respect, always. A church building, set aside, reminds us of this.

So, to meet with God in a place set apart has scriptural precedent and reminds us of God's transcendent holiness. And, experience of the holy sends us out, transformed, in order to bring others to that awareness. Moses, Samuel, Isaiah, Ezekiel - all experience God, all meet with God on the mountain or in the Temple in order to be sent down and out to do the work of God. One of the tragedies of some missions is the sending out of people who have not spent time with the Holy One. A place of meeting, be it a tent, or a temple, or a church, facilitates this process of transformation. We should remember this when it comes to our own attempts at mission.

However, the picture looks different when Jesus comes on the scene. More than once, Jesus seems to be ambivalent about his national heritage. He predicts the destruction of the Temple: 'Not one stone will be left on another' when his disciples are marvelling at its beauty. One time, Jesus says: 'I can tear this Temple down and build it up again in three days.' If I said this to Michael, tonight might not end well. Jesus was inflammatory. He was talking about himself as the focal point of God's indwelling, but no-one understood. He told the Samaritan woman at the well that arguments about where to worship were obsolete. The real locus of worship is Jesus himself; *true worshippers will*

worship the Father in Spirit in truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him, (John 4: 23). No mention of buildings here.

Some Christians have interpreted this attitude literally, eschewing buildings or having a disregard for them. But, other times we note that Jesus used the Temple for teaching; for a while, after the death of Jesus, Christians and Jews worshipped together in the Temple. St Paul preached and evangelised in the synagogue. God is not confined to a building, but a building can help people to find God. The issue at stake is not a building *per se*, but fetishizing the building and its contents. Making an idol of what is not God.

In the C of E, the upkeep of our buildings can be draining. There are occasions when they are fetishized. Yet, at the same time they are our witness in stone and a signpost to God. Most people know that a church facilitates worship of Jesus Christ, even if they never step foot inside. All sorts of people come into church buildings to spend time with God, or to have a quiet time. It is a public space with a specific purpose. It is valuable for a community, hence the fuss when church buildings were closed during lockdown. For practicing Christians the space is the chance for encounter and transformation; the base from which to be sent out and welcome others into the presence of God.

The nature of that welcome is important. Are we welcoming people into an open, friendly accessible space or a fusty time-warp? Care for and the presentation of the space we have can be a confident declaration of the faith we profess or an attempt to hide it.

The *What Next* question is crucial; in what new ways can you use the building to build up the people of God in this place? What are the opportunities the new look will afford? How will you be enabled to reach out to people who generally would not darken the doors of a church service? The building is important because it represents opportunity, and also because it is testament to God's goodness and provision over the centuries. It is testament to the faith of many generations. It is now your gift to the people of the parish and may God bless your mission and ministry through the effort you have put into making this space a home for God, and a home for those who need to find God. The inheritance you must pass on is not only bricks and mortar, or clunch and lime mortar to be precise, but a Christian community alive in the Cornerstone, or Keystone, Christ Jesus.

Amen.