

Sermon Archive 212

Sunday 19 August, 2018

Knox Church, Christchurch

Lessons: 1st Kings 8:22, 41-43

John 6: 56-69

Preacher: Rev. Hugh Perry



Well known cartoonist political journalist and author Tom Scott quotes his father in hospital for heart surgery as saying, in quite colourful language, that during the day he doesn't care about God at all. Mr Scott senior then goes on to say,

'But at night, when it's pitch black outside, the lights are dim in here and all you can hear is the sound of nurses' plimsolls on linoleum and the building's creaks and groans, I believe in God like you wouldn't believe. I am a daylight atheist!'¹

I suspect that throughout human history the fear of the dark unknown and the realisation of human mortality has always had the ability to inspire belief in the most hardened atheist. Non-believers often argue that humanity constructed the idea of an angry divinity to explain life's unpredictability. Following that reasoning, it is quite logical to suggest that sacrificial worship evolved to try and placate fearful deities. In fact, the idea of sacrificial worship as a fear fuelled attempt to control the uncontrollable is a valued argument for both secular sceptics and religious scholars.

Scott brings both those views together as he describes the ritual slaughter of six goats as part of the blessing of a Nepalese helicopter about to take him and Sir Edmond Hillary, along with others, deep into the Himalayas. Sickened by the experience Scott promised never to complain about an Air New Zealand safety video again.¹

On reading that I was reminded of a journey I made many years ago sitting beside a Presbyterian Minister who had been a World War Two pilot. Safety videos hadn't been invented at that stage. But as cabin crew earnestly gave us the safety instruction my travelling companion leaned towards me and whispered. 'All this is a waste of time Hugh, if anything happens you and I will just pray'.

In the time of Solomon sacrificial worship was the official health and safety procedure. Our reading explains how Solomon exploited that worship practice to enhance his political capital. The divine right of kings has trumped an elected majority for most of human history. However, a bit of capital development is always useful to dispel any thought that the partnership between monarch and divinity is fake news. Temples and walls have always been popular.

The temple that Solomon commissioned was designed for the sacrifice of animals. It was

the centre of worship at the Jerusalem temple until its final destruction in CE70.

Our reading from First Kings comprises of two extracts from Solomon's speech at the opening of the temple. The speech follows the standard formula for such occasions by reviewing the past and promising a bright future.

The temple, according to Solomon, renews the covenant David had with Yahweh. Solomon acknowledges that God chose David as king then goes on to cement his own position by first noting that he is David's son and reminds people of God's promise of a Davidic Dynasty. Solomon then points out that he has built the temple that his father couldn't.

Temple and palace standing together is a solid monument to a theocracy and comes, as close as any monarch can safely claim, to control God. Like David before him Solomon rules on God's behalf. Solomon's prayer has a hint of Solomon directing and controlling God which has been a feature of theocracies throughout history. That is also part of present day theocracies in both nations and isolationist sects.

But we also see religious thinking developing in this narrative as we do in much of the Hebrew Scripture. The message Nathan gave to David was that God cannot be contained in a house because the divinity moves about among God's people. That comes out strongly in the gospels as we shall see shortly.

Meanwhile we must note that Solomon acknowledges that fact but still justifies the Temple by suggesting that this temple, this 'God's House' is a place where people can meet with God through prayer.

That is also a perception Christians have of a church and, although we know we can worship God anywhere, the challenge is always 'yes but do we.' Furthermore, reflecting on our Presbyterian heritage in the middle of winter makes me shudder at the thought of worshipping in the glen with snow covering the heather.

Solomon's speech also embraces a widening understanding of Yahweh as not just the God of the Jews but the only God. The God of all people.

So, Solomon prays that God will also listen to the prayers of foreigners in this temple he has built. This is not a full admission of a universal God by Solomon but more a setting up of a 'meet with God franchise' where others can pray to God in Solomon's temple. This allows Jerusalem to benefit from pilgrimage tourism. There are echoes of this in our postmodern search for spirituality where people visit everything from Indian gurus to Celtic shrines to either 'find' themselves or 'let themselves go'.

When we build the stadium other team's supporters will be welcome to come and worship rugby also. They will of course have to witness the demise of their teams but, as the MP for Christchurch Central said in a speech to parliament, the retractable roof will allow God to watch the divinely favoured team.

I think Solomon had a similar view along with the economic advantages that Christchurch businesses hope and pray for from a stadium.

Our Gospel reading follows on from John's account of the feeding of the five thousand and ties that miracle story to communion theology. In so doing it opens the wider theological concept of living as if Christ is within us. That is a fundamental concept that moves Christians away from temple or even church centred worship. Christians are called to worship God by being Christ to others. That idea is highlighted by Robin Meyers in his books *The Underground Church* and *Saving Jesus from the Church*. He suggests that we should follow Jesus rather than worship Jesus. Meyers pursued that idea at a seminar in Napier a couple of years ago and was partially rebutted by a colleague of mine, Rilma Sands. She suggested that she prefers to follow Jesus and worship Christ and that distinction makes sense to me.

To follow Jesus means to live as we understand Jesus would live. That still allows us to worship Christ in whatever way suits our theological and emotional understanding. Worship then reinforces our spiritual connection with Christ and informs our growing understanding of what it means to live like Jesus and be Christ to others.

In using the feeding miracle as an acted parable John's Jesus goes on to explain the drama using even more confusing metaphorical language. That is a feature of John's Jesus. Not surprisingly the audience does not understand. It is difficult for today's readers also. But in today's passage Jesus hints at the metaphoric nature of what he is saying by moving to the resurrection and the spiritual presence of the Risen Christ. 'It is the spirit that gives life' Jesus says, so what he has been saying about consuming his body and blood, 'taking him into us' is about taking his spirit into us. Making his spirit our spirit.

When we eat a pottle of chips we can talk of making those chips part of us. That is biologically quite sound, but it doesn't turn us into potatoes. However, if our consumption of fatty chips is excessive we could well be compared with a sack of spuds. That would be life limiting rather than life giving.

But without any weight gain whatever we can take the spirit of Christ into ourselves. In so doing we become 'Christ like' even though we retain our own identity and that is certainly life giving. In such an interpretation we would understand 'spirit' in an ethereal way as a life force, the energy, the reality, the mystery that connects all life. Or in a contemporary secular context, the essence of an individual personality. What a person stands for, the essential something that makes each person unique.

In any such understanding of 'spirit' to consume, to take into ourselves the Spirit of Christ means to make ourselves 'Christ like'.

What John is having Jesus tell us is that in understanding a meal shared, bread as Jesus flesh and drink as his blood, we are not only remembering Jesus and all that he stood for (his spirit) we are reminding ourselves of our baptismal promise to live as if that spirit is our spirit.

Bringing our two readings together challenges us to replace both the temple and its sacrificial worship with the Spirit of Christ that is always with us. Worshiping Christ

involves being Christ like to others and the sacrifice we make is the giving of ourselves for the service of others.

As people long for an expensive sports stadium to restore the heart of the city I have a belief that more people would take the church seriously if we made a greater effort to publicly walk our talk. If the church was seen to be following Jesus people would join to help. But regardless of their taste for music or oratory there are better venues to indulge those passions. The church needs to be more than entertainment and the contemporary society would not tolerate it as an abattoir like Solomon's temple was.

That belief was confirmed recently when as part of a large secular group I went to deliver food parcels at 0800hungry. The woman who briefed us congratulated us on volunteering and went on to lament the fact that Christians did not volunteer. Churches these days, her college maintained, were just centres of entertainment.

I had some sympathy for their point of view but when called out by one of our group I felt the need to respond. I pointed out that many of our congregations are small and aged and don't have the energy to volunteer to drive round on a Saturday morning delivering heavy food parcels. What I didn't share was my frustration that through both need and inclination, small congregations commit most of their energy to the inward facing parish organisation. That is apart from the gate keepers who spend an amazing amount of energy preventing change.

I did not know the religious background of everyone in our volunteering group. But later in the day I reflected on the fact that the group did contain two Presbyterian ministers, a Quaker couple, the daughter of two Anglican Priests and a man who was in an Anglican youth group as a young person. The point being that beyond our primary motive at least some of us were led to be there because of our Christian background. Our Christian calling told us that delivering food parcels was a way of following Jesus.

Christian calling is not just lived out in our church activities. We are called in to worship and sent out to be Christ too others in our day to day lives.

In further understanding the message from these two readings we need to recall that following the cleansing of the temple, near the beginning of John's Gospel, Jesus is challenged to justify his actions with a sign. 'Jesus answered them, 'Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up.' (John 2:19)

Understandably the audience rebuts such an extravagant claim and the Gospel author adds this telling explanation. 'But he was speaking of the temple of his body. (John 2:21)

That is the verse that makes sense of today's Gospel reading and links our two readings together. The magnificent temple, first built by Solomon and restored and enhanced by Herod the Great, is replaced by the Risen Christ. Instead of all people coming to Solomon's temple to meet with God, Christ comes to all who accept his presence with them.

By accepting Christ into ourselves we live as Christ to others. We worship Christ and follow Jesus.

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