

## Sermon Archive 499

Sunday 25 August, 2024

Knox Church, Ōtautahi Christchurch

Readings: 1 Kings 8: 22-30, 41-43  
Psalm 84

Preacher: Rev. Dr Matthew Jack



I want to begin with two wee observations.

Observation Number One. Mum and Dad were having a significant wedding anniversary, and we, their three wonderful children, decided that we needed to give them a significant present. We booked them a trip to Sydney - including an anniversary meal at a flash French restaurant. We kept as a surprise that we had also had flown to Sydney to join them for the meal. Arriving in Sydney a few days before the dinner, I found myself with a Sunday to fill. So I went to an evening service at St Stephen's Uniting Church, up in Macquarie Street. I remember thinking, as I entered the building, "wow, this is a very grand space". It had beautiful stained glass and warm glowing wood panelling. The organ pipes were burnished gold and the pendant lights were a brilliant heavy-looking art nouveau copper and glass. The pulpit was vast and the furniture had elegance. For the five years, a few years later, that I was the minister there, I always loved the building. Nevertheless, because there was so much conflict under its roof, I confess to saying to a number of people who commented on the building's beauty "yes, but it is only a building".

I remember, when I first came here to Knox, having to avoid saying "it's only a building" - because I arrived here at a time when restoring our building was super-important to us. By re-building we were reclaiming what we had lost. We were putting something right, mending something broken. The building wasn't "just a building". I do remember, though, at my first or second service here, sitting on a cushion on the floor in the Hall for a children's talk. There were no organ pipes. The only nod towards stained glass was a big line drawing on the wall of the windows that had shattered in the quakes. While it was nowhere near as elegant as the beautiful building in Sydney, sitting on my cushion on the floor, I thought to myself "this is all right, this is." We've got love and shaking - God is here.

Observation Number Two. On Tuesday's TVNZ news, it was announced that the rebuild of the Anglican cathedral in the Square had been put on hold. A request for more government money had been turned down nine days previously, so the project had just become unworkable. As Bishop Peter Carroll said "We need money. The only thing holding us back is the lack of money". Reporter Katie Stevenson, finished her report by saying "the heart of the city remains a construction site". I will not say to my Anglican colleagues "it's only a building", because from my lovely building that might come across as insensitive, and indeed I know that some of them are feeling very sad just now.

-ooOoo-

Solomon, whom we know was a very wise person, saw fit to build a temple. His father, before him, had had the idea of building one; but got the feeling that God didn't consider the timing right. "I'm perfectly happy with a tent", God had seemed to say. Goodness knows what had changed between the time of God saying "no", and God now saying "yes". Sometimes it's hard to determine whether the time is wrong or right, whether (in terms of every purpose under heaven) it's time to throw stones down or build stones up. But we know that King Solomon, as he opened his brand new temple, remembered his father (for whom the time had not been right). We also see though that Solomon doesn't characterise the time not-being-right as a time of God not being faithful. Indeed, although the time was not right, Solomon still sees his father David as having lived within God's faithfulness. That may be a matter of wisdom which we, in times when our dreams are not materialising, might consider.

With the temple now, however, **being** a reality, the question becomes "how does this dream-made-real matter to God?" Solomon acknowledges that God doesn't **need** a temple. "Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, O God", says Solomon, "much less this house that I have built". Temples aren't about locking God in, putting boundaries around where God is and isn't. This is the kind of insight that years later will move James K Baxter to say "Lord Holy Spirit, you blow like the wind in a thousand paddocks, inside and outside the fences, you blow where you wish to blow." The institution, the fabric, can never contain a God in whose nature is the capacity to be free. It's easy to argue that temples ought not to be built!

-ooOoo-

About 300 years after Solomon opened his temple, a poet living in a far-off land came on a pilgrimage to Jerusalem. The far-off land was probably a pagan land, where no one sang the songs of Israel, where Hebrew people were a misunderstood minority, where no ancestors were buried in the earth. The poet writes about approaching the temple from a distance, seeing its shape on the horizon, and how his heart and flesh sang for joy to the God lives. There's something about this building that makes him feel like he's come "home". Here he is not a marginal outlier. Here he is not someone whose language isn't understood. Here he's not someone who dreams of belonging - here he **does** belong. A wonderful poignant illustration of this "being at home" comes in the form a wee bird who's made her nest in the eaves of the building. On the roof line she's made a safe little structure in which she feeds and raises her young. It's a scene of nurture, of protection, of all creation having room. Room even for the sparrow.

I think that Solomon would have liked this poem, since "room for others" seemed an important driver for him. As he dedicated the temple, part of his prayer was that there'd be room even for the foreigner - people who hadn't built the house but who might have had prayers to say (hope for the world, concern for loved ones, confusions to set forth before the order and wisdom of the Creator). There's something here about wanting the house to say something about more than just the nation - but about the humanity shared by all, no matter where you come from. And that's something I can see value in building.

-ooOoo-

Solomon's temple stood where it was for about four hundred years, until it was destroyed - destroyed by one of the foreigners Solomon hoped might have felt welcome there. Nebuchadnezzar from Babylon decided it was far too much an artefact of national pride for the people whose spirit he wanted to break. Whatever inclusive foreign policy Solomon might have had at construction time, obviously by the time of the sacking of Jerusalem, it had been perceived by foreigners as a symbol of Jewish arrogance that needed destroying.

What's the purpose of a temple? Is one really necessary? Maybe not, but on return from exile, Nehemiah decided that restoration was in order. While Solomon had built the first one in a time of prosperity and spiritual energy, the second one was built by remnant work-force, recently returned from a time of having their spirits broken. They didn't have

Solomon's money. They didn't have his building materials. They certainly didn't have his freshness and energy - so of course **their** temple was much less grand. It's also interesting that the welcoming of foreigners didn't play a part in the second one. In Nehemiah 2, we have Nehemiah announcing his intention to rebuild. He's questioned by Sanballat the Horonite, Tobiah the Ammonite and Geshem the Arab. Nehemiah's response to them is to say *"The God of heaven is the one who will give us success, and we his servants are going to start building; but you have no share or claim or historical right in this city"*. It would seem that the Hebrew experience of losing their house to foreigners resulted in their becoming a lot less open to the idea that everyone has a prayer to say.

It's interesting also that another five hundred years later someone called Jesus entered the second temple and caused a disturbance. Tipping out the money-lenders who had set up shop there, he shouts "my house should be a house of prayer, but you have made it a den of robbers". It was the concern of Jesus that this house of God had lost its "room for all". This building, which was to have been the open arms of God, constantly needed rescuing from becoming something closed and exclusive.

Rescue it from being a God container. Rescue it from being the wrong thing at the wrong time. Rescue it from being a busy commercial activity. Rescue it from being something that locks people out. Preserve it as something that makes the heart and flesh sing. Preserve it as a place where the sparrow gives nurture to her babies. Preserve it as a place for the prayer of all people. Otherwise . . . well, it's only a building.

-ooOoo-

I guess you know that this sermon isn't really about a building. It's about that other temple that Jesus said he would build, and that Paul said was made of human stones. **We** are the building - the right people at the right time to do the right things - things that speak of the God who listens to the hope and love of all the people. Sorry to spring that on you so late in a sermon that seemed to be about a building. We are the building in constant need of rescuing from what we're not, need of preserving as the welcome of God that makes heart and flesh sing. And I think that requires of us a moment of quiet.

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