

God abolishes churches!

A sermon on Revelation 21:22 by Nathan Nettleton, 1 May 2016

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Message

The surprising image of the absence of church buildings in the fulfilled holy city is a helpful reminder that they have always been a risky concession and that their dangers need to be carefully avoided.

Sermon

Sometimes, for our sakes, God is willing to settle for second best. Sometimes God allows us to have something that God wishes we could do without, but knows we can't. The best known biblical illustration of this is the Israelite monarchy. The people said, "We want a King." God said, "Don't be stupid, you don't need a king. Kings always turn into megalomaniacs who overtax everyone and send your sons off to war. You'd be better off without one." But the people said, "We still want a king." In the end, God concedes that while it would be better if the people didn't need a king, they can't seem to cope without one. So God settles for second best and gives them a king. There are lots and lots of passages in the rest of the Bible that make it sound like God is so much behind the king that the monarchy must have been God's idea. Having settled for second best, God gets right behind the monarchy and makes the most of it. The fact remains though, that in God's ideal world there would be no kings.

Sometimes when God settles for and gets behind a second best option, we completely forget that God wasn't too keen on the idea in the first place. We can even get to the stage where we think it is the most precious thing in the world to God.

Tonight's reading from the Revelation to John, like most of the book, contains some startling images. In this one, John has a vision of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. This is the centrepiece of God's new creation, and the description of it is breathtaking. The city is lit up with the glory of God and people comes streaming through its gates from all over the world to worship God. The water of life runs through the middle of the city from the throne of God and the Tree of Life grows there, bearing fruits and leaves that bring healing and life to all the nations of the earth. What we are seeing in this vision is the reconciliation of heaven and earth; the marriage of heaven and earth. Once the new holy city with God's throne at its centre is established on earth as the vision depicts, there is no more distinction between heaven and earth. The two have become one. Earth is heaven and heaven is earth. And when that happens, nothing that's second best will remain. Once we taste the fullness of God's best for us, we'll no longer be twisting God's arm to let us have anything less. All those things that fall short of God's ideal, like second rate political systems, will be abolished and replaced with God's perfect alternative.

Now among all the startling images in this vision is a little reference to a feature of the new Jerusalem that highlights another second-best we've settled for. And it's one that comes as a shock to many of us. When the reign of God comes to fruition and the new holy city is established at God's command, it will be a city without even a single church building! Church buildings of all kinds - from the humblest chapel to the most grandiose cathedral, from the whitewashed preaching barn to the most ornate basilica - all of them will be abolished, and God will be glad to be rid of them!

John doesn't go into any great detail on this. He simply says, while describing the city he saw in his vision, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Why is there no special holy place of worship set aside in the city built by God? Because it doesn't need one. Because ideally we would have never needed one, but God let us have them anyway because we weren't coping too well without them.

Now this obviously raises some fairly pointed questions for us. After all, we're gathered here in a church building. It's not the most ornate or awe-inspiring in the history of church architecture, but we do our best to make it look nice and to give it a sense of atmosphere that stimulates us to pray and worship. Some of us have grown somewhat attached to it. I know that when I go into the prayer chapel, I sometimes have the thought, "What if someone's been in and vandalised it?" I'd be distraught. It is a special place to me. It is a place where the distance between heaven and earth feels a lot less. So why is God not too keen on such places? Why are they no more than second best? Why is God planning to abolish them? And what does that mean for the way we worship in this place?

The beginning of the answer to those questions is given in the brief reference in the vision. A temple would be superfluous. When everything is brought to fulfilment and heaven and earth are one, there would be no meaningful function that a Temple could serve. For us, the church building functions as a kind of icon or sacrament. When we look at an icon, we don't claim to be looking at God, but that we are looking at something that helps us to think of God. It is a bit like a window in that what we are really trying to do is look through it and beyond it to catch a sight of what the icon can only ever hint at. When we gather around the table for the sacrament of bread and wine, it is not because we think bread and wine is all there is of Christ, or that Christ is nowhere else; but because in focussing our attention on the presence of Christ here, we can begin to taste more of the presence of Christ everywhere.

The church building can be like the icon or the sacrament. We don't claim that God is more present here than anywhere else, or that heaven is closer to earth here than anywhere else; but the church is a place where we are used to focussing our attention on the presence of God, and it is a place where we are used to praying as though we were walking through this space right into the banqueting room of heaven itself. So with time and practice it has become easier for us to perceive God's presence here than it is in our workplace or our lounge room or out in the street. It is a place that we have made sacred in order to help us to sense the sacred in everything, by starting somewhere.

But in the new holy city, with the throne of God in the centre and the whole city lit up with the glory of God, what would be the point? When every place has become clearly sacred space that is filled with the presence of God and reflects the glory of God, how could you set aside a space to be more sacred? We would have no need of special places to help us to open ourselves to God and to train us to perceive the presence of God elsewhere. So a special holy place set aside for the worship of God would be as utterly useless as having a special space set aside for breathing.

But I don't think that that's all there is to the Revelation's note that there will be no Temple, no church building, in the new holy city. I think there is also a more pointed criticism of what church buildings do to our understanding of God and our practice of religion, and I think it

is something we need to be reminded of. You see, this is by no means the first time in the Bible that the value of the Temple has been questioned. There was debate when King David first proposed building a Temple. “Does God live in houses made by human hands?” asked the prophets. The debate raged again each time the Temple was destroyed by an invading army and the people had to decide whether to rebuild it. Jesus saw the temple as something that needed “cleansing” and he predicted its destruction, with no apparent dismay. He even joked about doing it himself! The first Christian martyr, Stephen, was stoned to death after a speech that included quoting the prophets again to question the value of the Temple. We could spend hours going through the examples. John’s image in the Revelation seems to be the last in a long line of biblical passages suggesting that sacred buildings had always had the potential to corrupt true religion.

Again, we could spend hours unpacking the reasons why, but we won’t. I’ll just touch on a couple. The first was apparent in ancient Israel. An ideology grew up around the Temple that said that because it was the house of God, then it stood to reason that God would not let his house be destroyed and therefore the city where the Temple stood was immune to disaster. The people’s image of God became so localised that they thought that God cared about this place more than any other and that therefore they were under God’s protection whether they lived in accordance with God’s will or not. The presence of God and the activity of God came to be seen as located in and almost confined to a fixed object. The temple became a lucky charm, an idol - the thing they trusted to protect them and ensure their wellbeing. And so, like every idol, it became an obstacle to God, rather than a mediator of God.

Alongside that, there was all the activity and hierarchy that came to be associated with the Temple, or with any other big sacred building. It is easy for those whose work and livelihoods revolve around the temple to begin to think and teach that it is the maintenance of the Temple and its staff and its ritual activities that is the centre of true religion. If I could run a successful marketing campaign selling the idea that God is really in this place and that all that God really wants from people is that they come here, participate in what we do here and contribute to the financial resources of this place and its work, then I’d probably pull a much healthier pay cheque. But I’d be a liar. I’d be failing to tell you that God is actually much more interested in whether you love your neighbour than how much you put in the offering. I’d be failing to tell you that God is much more concerned about whether you are merciful to those you meet during the week than how well you sang “Lord have mercy” tonight. I’d be failing to tell you that God is much more concerned to see people doing justice than to see them doing good liturgy.

As long as the church buildings and the liturgies and activities that take place in them are shaping a people who will worship God by the way they prayerfully live out their lives in love, mercy, justice and peace, then those buildings and their activities have a valuable place in our lives. But the history of such places shows how easily they can be corrupted so that we substitute the adoration of the place and its systems for the honouring of God in godly living. When God let us have a temple and later church buildings, it was always a risky move: a second best option taken as a concession to our need for ‘things’ to help us perceive the presence of God and taste the fruits of heaven. God allows us to make use of such things, and even honours our use of them, because God knows that most of us are still a long way short of being able to do without them. But if we are not reminded from time to time of the inherent dangers in our use of church buildings, then we are running a grave risk of repeating the mistakes that Jesus and the prophets spoke against.

Churches and their ceremonies can contribute to our ability to be the people of God who live out the love, mercy and justice of God in the world. But in the Revelation, John tells us that the day is coming when they will be utterly superfluous. God will have given us a new holy city with no church buildings at all because we will know every place to be alive with the presence of God and we will worship God with our every action and our every breath. Come, Lord Jesus, Come!