

With or Without a Temple

A sermon on 1 Kings 8:1,6,10-11, 22-30,41-43 by Nathan Nettleton, 25 August 2024

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Message

While a dedicated building can serve a valuable role in our worship, God calls us to follow far beyond the confines of the building.

Sermon

Last Sunday I preached about singing together in worship, and had to tackle the question of how that has changed given that we now gather for worship exclusively online. Tonight I need to tackle a similar question about how our online gatherings change another previously taken-for-granted reality.

As most of you know, we are in the process of seeking to let go of the church building that has been our worship home and gathering place for almost sixty years, but which we have not used now for nearly four and a half years. Back before we moved into that building, we had to give up another one that had been our home for a hundred years before that, so this is not the first time we've dealt with the challenges of letting go of a building. But it is the first time for this generation, and it's different this time because, instead of letting go of one building for another, we are now letting go for a common life with no building at all.

Some weeks ago, reflecting on the emotional struggles we were having with this, John Sampson said we were a bit like someone who had stumbled into a nudist colony and desperately wanted to join but couldn't quite bring themselves to take their clothes off. That is to say, we have glimpsed a new world in which we are set free from the building, and we are very much attracted to the look of that life, but actually casting off the building still feels a bit too vulnerable and exposed.

The truth of that was borne out in the congregational consultation sessions we held to talk about our feelings and expectations around handing the building to others. A lot of the things we shared revealed, more than anything else, that we felt safer and more comfortable knowing that we still had that building, even if we could no longer imagine returning to it for anything more than the odd special occasion.

The reason I need to talk about this tonight is that the Bible reading set for us tonight from the first book of Kings was all about the place of a dedicated worship building in the faith and life of God's people. It told the story of the dedication of the newly constructed temple by King Solomon, and the way the story is told and the content of Solomon's great prayer of dedication tell us great deal about how the temple was understood and how it functioned in Israel's worship and self-understanding.

So for this reading to come up on the very weekend that we have commenced negotiations with another congregation about taking over our building seems to demand some attention. As we deal with our complex feelings about facing a future in which we no longer have a building, what might this story have to say to us? And I don't think that that question can stop with this story. We need to take this story as the beginning of a much longer story of Israel's relationship with the temple, because of course, Judaism has had to come to terms with

worshipping without its sacred building too, and the Bible contains various contested strands of thought on what that all means for faithful prayer and living as people tried to work it out.

Some of the contested strands are already apparent in this story, as we have it in our Bibles. Solomon's temple was built and dedicated about a thousand years before the time of Jesus, but the story continued to be passed down and tweaked in the retellings until it reached its final written form after the Babylonians had destroyed the temple and taken the Israelites into exile in 586 BCE. So there are bits of the way this story is told that reflect different strands of thought throughout those centuries. Let's unpack that a bit, and then see what happened afterwards and how it relates to our situation.

One of the main ways that the temple was understood was as a symbol of the presence of God among the people. This continues today in the design and interpretation of many churches, so the temple or church is seen as the place where we go to encounter and experience the presence of God. Before Solomon's temple was built, we heard of Solomon's father David expressing his discomfort about living in a palace while God was still "living in a tent". He wanted to rectify this anomaly by building the grand temple as a home for God, but God said no and reserved the task for Solomon.

In the dedication story, we read that as soon as the priests had placed the ark of the covenant in place in the new temple, "a cloud filled the house of the Lord" ... "for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord." And Solomon's prayer of dedication focuses on asking God to honour the prayers of any people who trustingly offer their prayers towards the temple. These are strong symbols of the temple as the centre of the presence of God on Earth.

But what almost inevitably happens is that the idea of the temple being "a symbol" of the presence of God easily morphs into a belief that it is the actual home of God, and that belief has massive political consequences. People begin to imagine that the existence of the temple as God's home guarantees their safety, because God could not allow the destruction of God's own house, or God's own city, or even God's own nation. So the temple comes to be seen as giving the Israelites an immunity from even the consequences of their own unfaithfulness. Perhaps that is still a factor in Israeli politics today. God is here, so we are safe. Arguably, one of the things that contributed to the capture of Jerusalem by the Babylonians was that the people thought the presence of the temple made it impossible, and so they failed to properly prepare for the attack.

But although we can certainly read this story and see in it this belief in the temple as the presence of God, we can also see evidence of later questioning of this belief. So in Solomon's prayer of dedication, the story now emphasises him saying, "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!"

And when Solomon prays about people offering prayers towards the temple, rather than implying that that is the same thing as offering prayers towards God, he asks God to also look towards the temple. So rather than being the place where God dwells, this alternative strand of thought sees the temple as the place where the people's prayers and God's care meet as both turn towards the temple from wherever they may be.

Even the architecture of the place carries some of this critique of trusting too much in the temple as guaranteeing the presence of God. Consider the ark of the covenant, which was sometimes described as God's footstool on earth. It was very common in ancient temples to have a box that was considered the footstool of the relevant god. But unlike most, the ark of the covenant still has carrying poles. God's footstool is mobile, and so God's presence is by no means confined to the temple. Some of you will remember a reading in Compline a week or so back that playfully talked of God breaking out of the sanctuary. It's not a new idea.

Now, it is no surprise that the story as we now have it contains these implied warnings against too closely linking the sacred building with the presence of God, because those elements came to be more important and more emphasised after the destruction of the temple and the exile to Babylon. A people who had previously tended to think that their God lived in a particular land and even in a particular building in that land now had to rethink their understanding of God and of where God's presence could be encountered.

You can hear the beginnings of that struggle in Psalm 137 where the exiled people say, "By the rivers of Babylon we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion. How could we sing the Lord's song in a foreign land?" They think that in Babylon they are too far away from God for God to hear them. But there in Babylon, Judaism began to reinvent itself as a relationship with the God of the universe who could be encountered and worshipped anywhere.

Seventy years later, they return to Judea, and rebuild the temple, although many of the old folks weep again because the new temple seems a bit small and puny compared to the old one. It was not until just a few years before the birth of Jesus that King Herod the Great commissioned a massive expansion project, fully rebuilding and almost doubling the size of the Temple. That expanded temple is the one Jesus knew, and the one he warned would be torn down by the Romans, as indeed happened in the year 70.

Though it has never been rebuilt again, its site continues to occupy a significant and contentious place in Jewish thought. A remaining section of the ruins is now known as the Western Wall, and is an important place of Jewish gathering and prayer. The rest of the site is now occupied by one of Islam's most important mosques, instantly recognisable for its massive gold dome. There are right-wing extreme Zionists, both Jewish and Christian, who dream of tearing down that mosque and rebuilding the temple. You may have heard the furore a few weeks ago when a far-right Israeli politician illegally entered the mosque precinct, deliberately ratcheting up the tensions.

We are not the only ones having trouble letting go of a sacred building, but I sure hope we won't still be dangerously obsessed by it in a thousand years time!!

Jesus, of course, had a very ambivalent relationship with this temple, and as his followers, we will want to be looking to him for our lead. Jesus visited the temple a number of times, and quite a bit of the teaching that has been preserved for us was delivered there. But all four gospels record the story known as the cleansing of the temple, when an angry Jesus staged a major protest against corruption in the temple establishment, and basically closed down the temple operations for a day.

In John's gospel this action comes right at the start of Jesus's public ministry, more or less setting the tone for all that is to follow. Challenged to prove his authority for this protest, Jesus says, "Destroy this temple, and in three days I will raise it up." But, says the gospel writer, "he was speaking of the temple of his body" (John 2:19-21), and so we are hearing Jesus pretty much giving up on the temple building and beginning to apply the concept of the temple as a place of worship to something else, to human beings.

The Apostle Peter later extends that idea further, combining it with the idea that we as the church are Christ's body, and therefore are a temple build of living stones, of people. "Come to God, ... and like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ." (1Peter 2:4-5)

Back to Jesus, when the Samaritan woman at the well asked him about the correct place to worship and encounter the presence of God, Jesus said, "Believe me, the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. ... True worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him. God is spirit, and those who worship him must worship in spirit and truth." (John 4:21-24)

That passage too comes shortly after Jesus's conversation with Nicodemus where he describes the Spirit as being like an unpredictable wind, carrying us who knows where. So, far from Jesus championing temple, synagogue, cathedral or chapel as essential to our worship and our discipleship, we see him drawing us, as Spirit blown people, to his own body and then into his body, to be built as living stones into a spiritual dwelling place for God that emerges anywhere and everywhere as the Spirit carries us into all the world.

It is interesting to note, though, how the image and architecture of a dedicated worship building, although greatly relativised as the Bible progresses, continue to be used as metaphors to help us understand what is going on in our worship. It is there in that image from Peter of us being living stones built into a spiritual house of worship, and it is there even more strongly in the letter to the Hebrews, much of which is structured around images of the temple and its worship rituals.

Perhaps that is where we are at in this strange new world of gathered worship in virtual space. Though we no longer gather in a building, or any other kind of physically defined space, we still use some of the language and some of the visual imagery of a physical worship space, and yet as Jesus said to the woman at the well, we are worshipping not on a particular mountain, nor in the Jerusalem temple, nor in the church building at 12 Surrey Road, but surely still in spirit and truth. The Holy Spirit who makes all things new is not deterred by this new technology, but blows through these new virtual connections, uniting us as we gather in real time to encounter one another and become the body of Christ or the holy priesthood that draws near to God as one people in this virtual space.

I don't pretend for a moment that anything I have just said is going to overcome all the emotional connections we have to that Surrey Road building, or soothe all our misgivings about letting go of it and moving fully into a new reality that is not defined or associated with any physical property. I don't pretend it is going to take away our fear of what John described as taking our clothes off, laying aside the building. But perhaps to run with John's metaphor, Jesus did say that if someone asks for your coat, give them your shirt and pants too, and some one is asking about our building, so perhaps the time to strip it off is here!

Nothing I've said can eliminate the discomfort of that, but I hope I have at least enabled you to see that the trajectory of the Biblical witness is away from a dependence on buildings as facilitators of our worship. Leaving the building behind will not be leaving the presence of God behind. God escaped from the building long ago, and like an unpredictable wind will always be out there somewhere, beckoning us on into God's as yet unknown future.

Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain God, much less any house that we have built! And yet, God will be with us always, even in virtual space, even to the end of the world.