

24.12.2017 St John with St Mark, Bury  
Advent 4. 2 Samuel 7:1-11,16. Romans 16:25-end. Luke 1:26-38.

Our reading from 2 Samuel reflects the crisis over the issue of building a house for God. This issue became crucial for the kingship of David. All around the people of Israel were kingdoms where their God dwelt in temples. Israel stood out in not having a holy house, but having a tent in which God could visit the people. Comparing themselves to the other people, Israel seemed to be disrespectful to God by only having a tent. David resolves to build a house for God, a house of cedar. Initially Nathan the prophet backs David's decision. But God speaks to Nathan and Nathan's mind is changed.

God questions why David thinks God should dwell in a house of cedar. The implication is that David is building the house for his own aggrandisement rather than to the glory of God. Instead of God dwelling in a house of cedar, God prefers to dwell in a tent. Why is this? Quite simply, the tent recalls the escape of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and the crossing of the Red Sea when the Israelites crossed on dry ground and the Egyptian forces were drowned. This was **the** mighty victory of God over the forces of evil. Israel depended on God for the victory and God won the victory by God's mighty arm. Then came the journeys through the wilderness, with God dwelling in a tent. And Israel loved God in the wilderness. It was like the first love that people experience. Deeply romantic and with oaths of loving for ever. This is what God remembers. Why would God want to exchange the tent for a house of cedar?

In the biblical narrative it is Solomon, David's son who builds the Temple.

In the conversation over the building of the Temple, God does something else that is remarkable. In the narrative David is told that his family shall be established and his kingdom shall stand for all time and his throne shall be established for ever. God is with David's line and will establish that line for ever. David may have been taken from the sheepfolds, a shepherd boy. But now David's line is established for ever more. Now we need to remember that history is written by the victor. And David was the victor in the struggle with the house of Saul. David replaced Saul as king. David's people are writing this history and consequently they boost David's family.

However, having said that, I have to acknowledge the profound and rich veneration of the house of David that takes place in Judaism. David is the greatest king, the one under whom there emerged an empire for Israel, the one who established laws and wisdom, the one whose sexual frailties led to a crisis but who came through those frailties to live virtuously. David is remembered as being a true shepherd of the people and their true king.

Now Christians picked up the thread of David, and the thread of buildings. Christians like Luke told the story of a man called Joseph of the house of David (despite the many crises of Israel the line of David continued). Joseph had an arrangement with a girl called Mary. But God intervenes and sends Gabriel to win Mary over to do something vital for the kingdom of God. Mary is to be the theotokos, the Christ-bearer. She is to give birth to the Son of the Most High, whose name will be Jesus. Jesus is related to Yeshua, meaning 'saviour'. Out of her deep trust in God, Mary says 'Yes', and 'be it unto me according to your will'. Mary's great faith in God is the greatest gift to God and humanity as she agrees to bear the Christ-child, the anointed one.

I mentioned that David was a shepherd boy. This was the work of the youngest and least powerful in Jesse's family. David is poor. Mary is also poor. In her time women only gained honour through child-bearing and marriage. Mary is unmarried therefore not a true woman, and she is yet to give birth. She is

poor. God takes the poor and raises them up on high. God's kingdom is the kingdom where the rich are brought low and the poor are raised up. God's kingdom is a place where the usual nature of society is radically challenged and a new society is proclaimed. In our society we are intent on making people poor. If you are on benefits, the chances are that you are not making ends meet. One of the symptoms of this is the spread of numerous food banks where the poor can get food when their money runs out. Even people in work are having to resort to food banks as wages do not keep pace with inflation and the cost of living. This should shame us, for our country is the fifth richest in the world. It is obscene that destitution should be the fate of many. It is unscriptural.

Having said that, David's line is being fulfilled. Jesus will grow up under the earthly fatherhood of Joseph, a man of David's line. God will have a king on the throne of David.

Christians saw Jesus as being the fulfilment of the promise of God towards the line of David. The shepherd-king would have a true successor - Jesus the saviour.

As Christianity spread and developed it faced the issue of how to meet. The earliest believers met at the Temple, in synagogues and in homes, or they rented halls. But eventually they built churches. We have come to understand that there is a relationship between churches and peoples. Churches are essentially giant umbrellas: they shelter us from rain in winter and the summer sun. We have come to understand that decoration can be a good thing, because it tells stories and raises our hearts to heaven. I love the figure above the altar, the risen Christ in glory. But buildings are about the people. The people are the heart of the building because it is the people that we are supporting by having a building. Never should the building so dominate that the people are forgotten. There is a church in this diocese that spent 13 years working out what to do about the roof. In this soul-destroying process, the people were all but ground down. But by the wisdom and perseverance of the parish priest, hearts were kept alive and the vision of God maintained.

One of the most important books on modern church buildings is called Re-pitching the Tent. This book outlines a theology for the renewal of our church buildings and argues how the building can become the servant, not the master, but the servant of the people of God. Re-pitching the Tent deliberately refers back to the questions of buildings in 2 Samuel and the victory of God at the Red Sea.

We know that we face the issue of what to do with our building. We know that, nationally, church attendance is declining. There has been some decline here. But we are fortunate in having some new people. But the need to have a building that can face new priorities, new needs, and be an umbrella that can nurture a renewing congregation and community. This is the question as to what is the right building for God, a house of cedar or a tent. The question now rests with us and the Christ born into the poor and calling us to wash the feet of those poor. Amen.