

***Can God dwell on earth?* - sermon by Rev Phil Wootton on 1 Kings 8: 22-30 John 6: 56-69
Sunday 22nd August 2021**

Children often come up with the best questions. I remember one asking: 'The vicar says, the church is God's house.' Yes, comes the reassuring adult answer. 'But can God really live there?' You suddenly realise the child is imagining opening the church door to God's domestic life, cooking his tea, dozing in front of the TV and may be kipping down on the altar for a good night's sleep. Well, it's not quite like that! But how about we rediscover childlike expectation of really meeting God as we step over the threshold into church?

Solomon asked the same question: 'Can God really dwell on earth?' Solomon is filled with awe and wonder at worship in the newly built Temple – the great vision and legacy of his father, David. This moment is the culmination of the saga of Israel's early kings, that we have been following for the last couple of months. This is where it was all heading: a kingdom for Israel with the Temple of Israel's God at its heart. The Temple was one of the wonders of the ancient world – with dressed quarried stone; cedar and pine wood from Lebanon; olive wood carvings of cherubim and palm trees and open flowers, inlaid or overlaid with gold. The very best of human endeavour, skill and craft, channelled into the worship of God. And yet, Solomon asks, 'Can God really dwell on earth?' No building can contain God. Indeed, heaven itself cannot contain God. As we too, care for our buildings, dedicated to making them both functional and beautiful, how about we renew our sense of awe that the God of the cosmos meets us here?

Israel's God, the Lord of heaven and earth, had made himself known in fire, cloud and wind; in word and vision; in deserts and on mountain tops – free and dynamic and sovereign. Israel's God had never needed a building to dwell in. But Israel's people needed somewhere focus to their worship, a place to make their sacrifices and know the forgiveness of their sins, a location where they sensed heaven and earth come within touching distance. This was the Temple. Here the Name of the Lord shall dwell. The Lord's 'Name' was always illusive ('I am who I am') and rarely spoken. But to say 'the Name of the Lord' speaks of God's identity, authority and reputation – his 'good name' maintained and honoured through the worship. How about we, too, recognise how we keep our buildings (along with how we live and speak and act in other facets of life) honours the Name of the Lord? How about we recognise humbly that when we get it wrong, God's reputation is sullied?

Like our churches, the Temple was a place of prayer. Solomon knew well the God of all the earth could hear prayer anywhere, but nevertheless his Temple would be a special place of prayer. We have that same sense. A line for TS Eliot's poem *Little Gidding* says, 'You are here to kneel where prayer has been valid.' Prayer is valid everywhere, and yet, somehow, being in a holy place seems to validate our prayers. Some people speak of 'thin places' where somehow heaven seems nearer. I'm not convinced that there's something inherent in the place, but rather it's the cumulative impact of centuries of devotion. The whole planet is designed a 'thin place'. As poet GM Hopkins put it, 'The world is charged with the grandeur of God.' How about we look at it with new eyes – a world of opportunity for prayer?

The Temple was for all. It was Israel's glory and treasure, but the God of Israel made clear, it was to be a house of prayer for all nations. People might not come with the 'right' notions of what God is like and how to pray. But this place was still to be available to them. In some sense, if they pray in that place where prayer has been valid, they acknowledge the lordship of the God worshipped there. Today, the sole surviving part of the Temple (actually, the second Temple, not Solomon's) is the Western Wall. And still today, in that most contested cities of Jerusalem, non-Jews are welcome to come and pray in that space, to touch the wall, to set written prayers into its cracks. How about we keep prioritising ensuring our houses of prayer remains open for all?

Jesus described his body as the Temple: 'Tear this Temple down and I will rebuild it in three days. (The temple he spoke of was his body.)' – John 2: 19, 21. All the wonder and majesty of the Temple was summed up in him, and indeed superseded, for, unlike the old temple, he never became compromised by corruption and self-seeking. In him, uniquely, God is revealed – 'the fulness of the deity dwells' (Colossians 2: 9). In him is the true touching point of heaven and earth. His is the great sacrifice of redemption, the forgiveness of sins. To him and through him, all worshipped can now be focussed. Can God really dwell on earth? Yes, in Jesus, God can!

In today's Gospel reading we heard the culmination of the bread of life narrative. It began a month ago with Jesus' feeding a crowd of 5000 until they were full to burst. Now it concludes with his promise spiritually to feed fully all believers for all eternity. That spiritual bread is of his very self. Christ gives himself, so we might feed on him. He gives his life, that we might truly live. We find our lives transformed – strengthened, renewed, reinvigorated, redirected – as we faithfully receive the bread in the Eucharist. Together, we who receive become his body on earth. Put crudely – although we are loathe to say such a thing given all our failures – we are to represent God on earth.

How can we say such a thing? It doesn't look much like it, after all, but that is our calling. We are to be the Temple of the Holy Spirit. We, as individuals and as the church, bear the Name – the reputation of God on earth. (No wonder that reputation has become tarnished!) The Temple is the place from which forgiveness flows. We, who know forgiveness through the shedding of Christ's blood, are in the best place to offer forgiveness in a hating world, and offer ourselves in the cause of reconciliation. We who have known the revelation of God through word and sacrament are charged with making God known through word and deed. We who have experienced the touching point of heaven and earth in our worship have the glorious prospect of offering to others a little touch of heaven.

God is not contained within a building. God is present throughout the earth. God's believing people, God's church are the primary means by which his presence can be known. How about we, believing people, make worship in the house of prayer our number one priority – for it is through our worship that the God of heaven now most visibly dwells on earth.