

Reflection: It's (not) just a building - 1 Kings 8: 22-30 and Matthew 21: 12-16

I am a big fan of Kirstie and Phil and their TV show, *Location, location, location...* I love how, as a viewer, you accompany people in their search for home... and I really love the moment that sometimes happens when someone gets what they call *the feel...* that sense that this is the place... this house will be our home... You may, when house hunting, have experienced that yourself... or perhaps you're lots more level-headed than me...!

Today, we explore another encounter with God – as Solomon dedicates the newly built Temple in Jerusalem – and we are thinking about that feeling of a special place... of *sacred space...* the feeling that *God is in this place...*

God is in this place...

In Solomon's prayer about the temple, the big idea is that this is the place where – for God's people, Israel - God can be encountered...

Building the temple had been a great ambition for Solomon's father, David, who wanted to create a place where *the Ark of the Covenant* could rest. The Ark was the sign of God's presence with Israel during their wanderings in the wilderness and the repository for the text of the law, that summed up the people's relationship with God. There are stories that suggest this sacred object had been moved about with whoever was in charge, but when *he* is king, David decides that it should have a permanent home, in his city, Jerusalem... So, the ark is moved (you can read about how that goes in 2 Samuel) and it's placed in a tent, kind of like the one it would have been in when God's people were in the desert... But then David gets a better idea – surely the ark needs a purpose-built resting place. *Look, I am living in a palace made of cedar wood, but the Ark of God is in a tent!*" he says to himself (2 Samuel 7). But through the prophet Nathan, God says no... leave it alone... *I will make a house for you* instead (and here God makes a dynastic promise, a bit like the one given to Abraham... that David's throne will be established forever). But, God says, as for a house for me, your son will take on this project...

Wind on many years and Solomon, David's son and successor does just that... and that's where we join the story, here at its culmination when the building is completed and Solomon prays... we've built this house for you,

God, please be in it... be in it for us, your people... be in it for everyone who enters it, Solomon prays later in a bit we didn't hear today (v43).

May this be the place where heaven and earth meet...

Heaven cannot hold him, nor earth contain...

God is in this place, Solomon prays, but not limited to this place... *Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built...* he says. Which made me think of *Christina Rossetti* writing about the mystery of the incarnation in her lovely Christmas poem *In the bleak midwinter...* *Heaven cannot hold him, nor earth contain...*

This is the paradox of God's character, God's way of being and of acting... that God cannot be contained... is not limited to space and time. And yet God freely chooses to be present in a particular place, at a particular time, nonetheless, to be known to people... in the Temple and in the incarnation... in Jesus' life as a human person...

Perhaps this helps us understand more of Jesus' reaction when many centuries after Solomon's prayer, – as we heard in today's gospel reading – he visits the Temple. Perhaps this helps us understand his fury at what's happening there... at people's failure to respond rightly to God's grace in enabling people to encounter Godself in the Temple... his fury at their failure to seek God deeply and humbly... at their failure to respect those many people who do come faithfully to the Temple to encounter God... He says to the traders whose booths he has ransacked: It is written,

"My house shall be called a house of prayer";

but you are making it a den of robbers.'

Earth cannot contain Jesus... not for ever... The temple cannot hold God... not completely... but where God's people faithfully gather, God promises to be present.

What about this place?

Today many people... even those who don't subscribe to any formal religion... have a sense of the specialness of buildings like the one we're in today... Their specialness is affirmed by church and state -this one is grade I listed... and is therefore subject to many secular and churchly

rules... But their specialness is also recognised by those who walk through their doors – just look at the visitors' books in our churches and you'll see comments about the beauty ... and the peace... as if there is something less tangible than the artistry and history to experience...

That's not to fetishise our church buildings – elsewhere, don't forget, Jesus critiques that strongly - but it's an encouragement to see them as buildings for mission... to look for ways to use them, to reflect their story as places built by and for the community, in the way we welcome people in...

So, I think about what happens in Duxford when we sing together on Wednesdays... what happens here and in Hinxton, when people from the Genome Campus wander in for a quiet moment in a stressful day... and I hope and pray that God will give us the wisdom and creativity to find more ways to welcome people into these amazing spaces.

I'll end with the Collect for the dedication festival of a church, praying this for all of us, for each of our churches...

Almighty God, we give you thanks for the fellowship of those who have worshiped in each of our churches, and we pray that all who seek you here may find you and be filled with your joy and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

As we took a moment to reflect, we listened to the words we've been thinking about today. They were set by Thomas Tallis during the reign King Edward VI, Henry VIII's son, who was himself a fervent reformer and enabled the spread of protestant thinking and churchly rules including the first book of common prayer. The words are sung plainly and simply so that the listener can follow them, as the Protestant reformers wanted.

Hear the voice and prayer of thy servants,
that they make before thee this day.

That thine eyes may be open toward this house night and day,
ever toward this place, of which thou hast said:

'My Name shall be there.'

And when thou hearest have mercy on them.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZfcHSyS2xgA>