

Solomon dedicates the Temple by Rev John Castle

A sermon given on Sunday 22nd August 2021 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: 1 Kings 8:1-43¹; John 2:13-22

Introduction

Places of worship are special places: our own church building is a good example of this. Yesterday Rob Brown married Rosanne here. This church has seen several generations of his family baptised and married here, as well as several family funerals. Many residents of Sandhurst who are not churchgoers can talk of similar life events being celebrated here. It's part of our local heritage, and is valued by many people who don't regularly attend worship.

In 2019 we began our celebrations of 800 years of worship on this site, and we re-dedicated the windows that we had managed to repair, due to the generosity of those who had given money or time for fundraising. And you'll be interested to know that a new fundraising committee has been formed, which is seeking to enable the WinSpire project to continue by seeking further sources of money to pay for repairs to the spire, clock and bells.

Today's reading from 1 Kings gives us an opportunity to use the story of the dedication of Solomon's Temple to reflect on our own place of worship.

¹ 1 Kings 8:1-3,6,10-11,22-30,37-43

Solomon's Temple

Last week we heard about the beginning of Solomon's reign, and how he'd asked God for wisdom to rule his people. His father David had brought peace and prosperity to Israel, largely by conquering hostile states all around, and Solomon was now in a position to build on that prosperity, and in particular to carry out the project which David had wished to undertake. It took seven years to build the Temple². And in today's reading we hear an account of the dedication ceremony.

It begins with the Ark of the Covenant, which had up to now been housed in a special tent called the tabernacle, being brought in by the priests to the Holiest of Holies – a special room at the far end of the Temple from the entrance, where only the High Priest would be allowed to enter. And then Solomon gets up to speak.

In such a ceremony today you might expect there to be a speech – perhaps in the form of a sermon. But Solomon makes a long prayer. He begins by remembering God's faithfulness to his people Israel and to his chosen King, David. And then he goes on to reflect that even the magnificent temple which he has built could not possibly be a worthy or sufficient dwelling place for God. This leads into a prayer that God will listen to and answer the prayers which people may make as they face a variety of challenges and setbacks in the future, with the Temple as a focus for their prayers.

² 1 Kings 6:38

There are three aspects of Solomon's Temple which I think are just as relevant when we think about our own church building today.

A Place of Worship

This may seem obvious, but most civilisations have places for the public worship of God, or the gods. Temples provide a place for people to go, either for regular worship or for special occasions and festivals. They are also the place where the official keepers of the religion work, usually offering sacrifices on behalf of the people. Mary and Joseph followed custom in taking Jesus as a baby to the Temple on the 40th day after his birth, and later Luke records how it was their practice to travel south from Nazareth to Jerusalem each year for the Passover festival. In chapter 2 of John's Gospel we read how the adult Jesus was angry at the way commercial interests had exploited worshippers and turned his Father's house into a market place – so angry that he overturned tables and drove out merchants and moneychangers.

This church building is also here as a place of worship for our community in Sandhurst. Worship can be individual or public, quiet or exuberant, traditional or contemporary in style. But when we enter here, let us remember that this is hallowed ground, where, like Solomon, we can remember God's faithfulness to us and to those who have gone before us. Whether we are here to pray, to worship or to undertake another role, such as singing in the choir, or doing something practical like cleaning or maintaining the building, let us do it all for God and to his glory. And that might

remind us to dedicate everything we do *outside* of this building also to God, and do it for his glory.

The Presence of God

The Temple was also a symbol of the presence of God among his people. During the time of Israel's wandering in the wilderness, before entering the Promised Land, God's presence among his people had been marked by a pillar of cloud by day and a pillar of fire by night. The Ark of the Covenant, a gilded wooden box containing the tablets of the 10 commandments, was also a symbol of God's presence among his people. And so in today's reading, when the priests brought the Ark into the Holy of Holies, the cloud of God's presence so filled the Temple that "the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud; for the glory of the LORD filled the house of the LORD."³

In our Common Worship services we often use the greeting "The Lord is here. *His Spirit is with us.*" We also remember the words of Jesus "For where two or three are gathered in my name, I am there among them."⁴ Of course, God is everywhere – as a spiritual being he is not limited by time and space. But for the Israelites, the Ark of the Covenant represented God's presence among them, and once the Ark was installed in the Temple, the Temple itself took on that role, and became the place of pilgrimage. Psalm 84, a psalm of pilgrimage, speaks of the joy of being in God's house:

³ 1 Kings 8:11

⁴ Matthew 18:20

¹ How lovely is your dwelling place,
O LORD of hosts!

² My soul longs, indeed it faints
for the courts of the LORD;
my heart and my flesh sing for joy
to the living God...

¹⁰ For a day in your courts is better
than a thousand elsewhere.

And by extension, Jerusalem, the site of the Temple, became the holy city, itself a symbol of God's presence⁵.

And so when the Babylonians came in 587 BC and destroyed not only Jerusalem but the Temple itself, the heart of the people of Israel was broken⁶. They had thought that however much they might sin against God, he would never allow his holy Temple to be destroyed by Israel's enemies. But only a short time before this happened, the prophet Jeremiah had warned them not to trust in the Temple as a guarantee of their safety, and had said that if they did not repent, the Temple itself would be torn down.⁷

In the same way Jesus prophesied that the Temple of his day, based on the one that was built after the Exile and further rebuilt magnificently by Herod the Great, would be destroyed because the people of his day had not recognised the things that make for peace or the moment when God had come to visit them.⁸

⁵ See, for example, Psalms 48, 87, 122

⁶ Psalms 79, 137

⁷ Jeremiah 7:1-15

⁸ Luke 19:41-44

There's an interesting feature in the cleansing of the Temple in John 2 where Jesus refers to his body as a Temple: in the man Jesus God is present with his people, "God with us" in the flesh.

Jesus further prophesied to the woman at the well in Samaria that

"the hour is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem... The hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth, for the Father seeks such as these to worship him."⁹

St Paul writes of the church, that is, the assembly of his followers, as being God's Temple¹⁰, and he also writes of the individual Christian's body being a temple of the Holy Spirit¹¹. By the Holy Spirit, God comes to take up residence in our lives, both as individual believers and corporately in the Church, which is the Body of Christ. The way we treat our bodies, and the way we treat the Body of Christ, that is, our fellow Christians, is therefore really important. Do you realise what a privilege it is to have the Creator of the universe living inside you? Do you see yourself as a place of worship? Do we allow God's glory to shine through us to others?

A Focus for Prayer

The final aspect of Solomon's Temple that I'd like us to consider today is its role as a focus for Prayer. This theme

⁹ John 4:21,23

¹⁰ 1 Corinthians 3:16-17

¹¹ 1 Corinthians 6:19

takes up most of Solomon's prayer in 1 Kings 8. Here he speaks of God's people turning towards the Temple when they pray, "stretching out their hands towards this house"¹² and seeking God's help in times of adversity, whether in war or through natural disaster. During the recent Covid crisis, places of worship were allowed to be open for private prayer, even when corporate services were not allowed. Churches are often a focus for people to come when a major tragedy occurs, such as the recent shooting in Plymouth.

I expect you noticed that Solomon doesn't only mention prayer "towards this house" by fellow Israelites, but also the prayer of "a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel".¹³ This theme is expanded in Isaiah, where God says that "my house shall be called a house of prayer for all peoples"¹⁴, which Jesus quotes when he cleanses the Temple in the gospel accounts of Mark and Luke. In the same way, we should look on our church building as there for everyone, not just regular worshippers. Unlike some town-centre churches, St Michael's is not a place that many people pass when going about their daily business, but perhaps we could think of ways to make our community aware that it is open for prayer. I expect that many people assume the building is closed during the week. Could we find ways of enticing them to come up and have a look around, and maybe say a prayer while they are here. We have a prayer board that is open for anyone to use to write a prayer request.

¹² 1 Kings 8:38

¹³ 1 Kings 8:41

¹⁴ Isaiah 56:7

Perhaps we could make better use of prayer stations to make it easier for people to pray in creative ways. And we mustn't forget that the world of social media provides a platform for people to share news and information. Our "virtual" presence on the internet might make up for the geographical distance of our church building from the centre of town. All of this, of course, requires individuals from our church to take responsibility for managing such initiatives. And of course, Heritage weekend provides another opportunity to make people in our community aware of the church building.

Conclusion

A Place of Worship, the Presence of God and a Focus for Prayer – three aspects of Solomon's Temple which have relevance also for us. This church building, on the site where thousands have prayed and worshipped over the centuries is a reminder to us and to the whole community that there is a God who is faithful and who cares for us. He delights to dwell among us and within us. He is worthy to be worshipped. He listens to our prayers.

The hymn which will be sung during communion today (Hymn 533)¹⁵ takes different parts of the furniture and worship of the church as a reminder of aspects of God's dealings with us. Perhaps during that communion time you might like to meditate on the words of the hymn and turn them into your own act of worship and prayer.

¹⁵ *We love the place, O God* (words by William Bullock and Henry Williams Baker)

- 1 We love the place, O God,
wherein thine honour dwells;
the joy of thine abode
all earthly joy excels.
- 2 We love the house of prayer,
wherein thy servants meet;
and thou, O Lord, art there
thy chosen flock to greet.
- 3 We love the sacred font;
for there the holy Dove
to pour is ever wont
his blessing from above.
- 4 We love thine altar, Lord;
O what on earth so dear?
for there, in faith adored,
we find thy presence near.
- 5 We love the word of life,
the word that tells of peace,
of comfort in the strife,
and joys that never cease.
- 6 We love to sing below
for mercies freely given;
but O we long to know
the triumph-song of heaven.
- 7 Lord Jesus, give us grace
on earth to love thee more,
in heaven to see thy face,
and with thy saints adore.