

Pentecost 8
22/7/2012

Mark the Evangelist

2 Samuel 7:1 – 14a

Psalm 46

Ephesians 2:11 - 22

Mark 6:30 – 34, 53 – 56

Sermon preached by Rev Dr Morag Logan

In our Old Testament reading today, King David presents a vision; a vision of a great temple which he could build in Jerusalem. In the lectionary's readings for the last several weeks, the passages have followed David's rise to power – the young shepherd boy chosen by God, the young child who becomes the giant killer, Saul's musician, Jonathan's friend. Following conflict with Saul, and seven bitter years of civil war, David is crowned king of all Israel. He captures Jerusalem with his own troops, and it becomes his own city. As he has captured it from hostile forces, not from other Israelites in the civil war, there is no tribal affiliation of this city, there is no ancient worshipping site here, there is no place for the worship of their God in the city at all. Last week we read of David's re-location of the ark of the covenant to Jerusalem, with great rejoicing.

So now David is sitting at ease for the first time, in a fine wooden house. He seems to be reflecting on all that he has accomplished, and looking around him for his next great project, and he compares his state with the state of the "ark of God," this box containing the tablets of the law which has been the primary religious focus for the tribes of Israel in all of their wandering, and for all of their the time they have been trying to establish themselves in the land. And the fruit of this contemplation by David: he recognizes the mismatch between his state, and current status quo for worship of God. David proposes to build a temple, a house for God, and he proposes this to Nathan, David's prophet, and it meets with immediate approval. After all, it probably isn't every day that a king volunteers to embark on a major, expensive, religiously based building.

It seems, though, from Nathan's dreams that night, that all of this planning between Nathan and David does not seem to be such a good idea to God. In fact, God seems to be rather put out by the idea of having a temple.

The responses that Nathan reports from God are three-fold:

Firstly, God seems to have a problem with the idea of a temple itself. Did I ever suggest I wanted a temple?? Asks God. This seems puzzling to us. Tents can be convenient things for mobility and freedom of movement, but they are humble dwelling places. They are necessarily small and not very grandiose. It is hard to make a tent appear imposing, inspirational. It is hard to bring a nation together symbolically, to create vast unifying assemblies and gathering in a tent. A building, though, speaks volumes. Buildings speak of permanence, of prosperity – at least, they do when they are not falling down! They speak of a people's religious commitment and their unity, working together on a grand focus. Buildings, temples can impress, inspire. For many ages, from thousands of years before David until quite recently, temples, cathedrals, mosques, were all the largest and most imposing of

buildings in cities – perhaps second only to the palaces. They spoke at the one time of the power of the religion, of the God, of the nation. All of this language and significance of temples and religious buildings is at stake here in David's suggestion to Nathan – but there is something very surprising about the nature of the God that David and we worship. Our God is not a God who demands the outward show, the language of grandeur and power in this way. However much David, and all of his later heirs have chosen to use this language to create the grand places, our God remains the God of the tent, choosing the humble, the small, the mobile, all the better to remain close to God's people, to all of his followers.

So the first response is essentially: build me a temple? What do you want to do that for? Whatever gave you that idea? – which scarcely counts as ringing endorsement.

The second part of Nathan's oracle enters into a bit of word play. David wants to build a temple, a house for God. God responds by pointing out that what is important is that it is God who will build a "house" for David. God will raise up the offspring of David so that his offspring and his kingdom will be established for ever. The ground has shifted quite crucially under David's feet in two ways. First, the meaning of "house" has changed – from bricks and mortar to a family, a lineage. The true stability of David's kingdom, the kingdom that God wants to establish is not in bricks and mortar, nor in the land that could be held or lost - but in the people, in those who will follow after. So David would build a temple to be the religious heart of the nation, to lift up God before the people – but he is reminded here that it is not the case that David will lift up God, but much more that it is God who has and will lift up David.

The third part of this complex, and close to contradictory oracle accepts the idea of a temple – but indicates that this is not the right time for this. It will be David's son who will raise up the house to God's name. So David has a fine idea, here, just with bad timing.

So why care about a temple that may or may not have been build about 2000 years ago? What is interesting to me here is not the questions around the building itself, but in the nature of this response by God. In his relationship with God, David finds his basic ideas called into question, and turned around, and eventually, he does not realise this great dream – he does not get to build the temple.

At this stage of our life as a congregation, we are working through a long period of a "pause" in relation to our buildings, our house of prayer. We are and have been considering our dreams and hopes for this church, are starting to think quite concretely about the end of John's ministry, and the search for a minister to lead us forward, thinking about our hopes and dreams for this congregation, our hopes and dreams for our worship space and use of space. Maybe we would see us a strong church, with a strong and fearless public voice. Maybe we dream of buildings being full, crowded, of a large congregation filled with people enthusiastic to contribute, to work and pray together, to be an important centre of this inner city community. Maybe we dream of a church filled with people younger than we ourselves are offering an assurance of life in the church beyond ourselves. These are all fine hopes and dreams – I share many of these hopes, dreams and visions myself.

It is important, however at a time like this to realise that whatever our hopes and dreams, and however excellent our renewed buildings will be, and our next minister is, the future will be different to the present, and it will be different to our hopes and expectations. It is important to allow the space for ourselves to consider the disturbing questions from God: when did I ever ask you to be big? To be important? To write your future in the stones of this place? There is the risk that this unsettling God of ours might still hold onto a fondness for tents over cathedrals, might still unsettle our assumptions of what it means for a congregation to be successful.

In the midst of waiting and planning and working, it is important to allow for the possibility that, like David, we might have excellent ideas that cannot be achieved in our time. Perhaps the best of our plans may take the best of our energy and good intentions and work, but we may be forced to realise that we will not achieve these plans within the time we individually have to give to them— and we may have to accept handing on the baton, allowing others to control plans and projects that we cannot realise.

Mostly importantly, however, I think we need, again and again, to be reminded with David that what is important is not that we can raise up structures, buildings, houses to and for the glory of God. What is much more important is that we remain aware always of the many ways that God has raised us up, established us as the church, the household of God, and the centre of his presence in the world.
