

6 January 2008

'Church Buildings: Who Needs Them?'

Mark 13:1-2, 1 Peter 2:4-10

The world is full of buildings put up by people who wanted to show off their riches and power. Some are palaces, from our own Buckingham Palace and Hampton Court, through the Romanian dictator Nicolai Ceausescu's notorious "White House" in Bucharest, to Saddam Hussein's encrusted (and bomb-proof) residences in Iraq. Some are basically memorials, like the Great Pyramids or the Taj Mahal. Many of our great Victorian town halls, such as the one in Manchester, were designed to tell the world that their communities were prosperous, go-ahead and vibrant centres of commerce. (Sadly, those same cities have often fallen on hard times since). And, of course, many of our great churches and cathedrals endorse the success of their benefactors just as much as they promote the glory of God.

The Jerusalem Temple in Jesus' time was precisely this kind of structure. It was built by the despot whose name we have all heard repeatedly in the Christmas story, the exceedingly clever and cruel politician King Herod the Great. At one and the same time, the Temple declared the pride of Israel but also the authority of the Romans, whose agreement had been necessary to authorise it. It told anyone who cared to look that Herod - actually a fairly small player on the wider world scene - was a man with whom locals dared not play games, the munificent giver (but also very much the ruler) of his people. Here was a person you didn't trifle with.

And the Temple certainly was magnificent. Although the dimensions of the actual sanctuary had been laid down in the Scriptures and so could not be altered, Herod made sure that this was surrounded by outer courtyards and set on a paved area the size of 20 football pitches. This, in turn, was encircled by nearly a thousand columns, a source of wonder for contemporary historians, each 30 feet high, six feet in diameter, and topped by a Corinthian capital. Some of the stones used in the Temple and still visible today weigh over 50 tons. No wonder the structure took over 46 years to build. Parts of it would probably have still been a building site when Jesus knew it.

I rather suspect that the Jews of the day had a somewhat ambivalent attitude to the Temple. On the one hand, they were proud to have such a splendid and fitting place to worship their God, and it certainly made its contribution to the greater glory of Jerusalem - even if it was an occupied city. Then, too, quite apart from the people it directly employed, the Temple brought in thousands of pilgrims a year, all of whom had to be fed, watered and bedded and who were a good target for souvenir sellers. Without the Temple, there is no doubt that Jerusalem would have been a lesser, poorer, place.

But there was always another side to things. The Jews knew perfectly well who had ordered the Temple's construction, and they loathed him. They were sickened by his morals which took no account of the Ten Commandments. They were horrified by the way he had callously killed thousands of his own citizens (and even his own family) simply to attain and keep power. And they were uncomfortable with his far-too-cosy relationship with their Roman occupiers. So the Temple was hardly an uncontroversial feature of the Jerusalem skyline.

Of course, this was not the first Temple that the city had seen, but the third. The first Temple had been put up during King Solomon's reign nine centuries previously, and we can read about it in the Old Testament; it stemmed from David's desire to give God something more suitable than a tent to live in. That Temple had been demolished when the Babylonians ransacked Jerusalem in 586 BC and for a century there had been no focal place of worship for Israel. The Jews returning from their exile made an effort to rebuild, under Ezra and Nehemiah, but their Temple was a puny and feeble effort, nothing in comparison with what had gone before. Herod's great building outclassed everything that had been seen on the site before.

And so it was not surprising that the disciples, looking at the Temple with Jesus, were overawed by the sheer scale of its architecture and construction. What might, what strength, above all what permanence it seemed to exude! Nothing - not earthquake, not fire, not battle - would ever be able to shift it. This Temple was a comforting symbol of God's enduring presence among his people. While the Temple stood - which would be for a very long time - they knew their faith was safe.

And so they were astounded when Jesus started talking like a site developer. "See that lot, lads?", he said, "Well, it's all coming down: going to be flattened". They couldn't believe their ears: it was saying that Westminster Abbey is going to be demolished to make way for a shopping mall, or like a football supporter in Ipswich being told that Portman Road is going to be replaced by a supermarket. The idea was not just shocking; it was preposterous. How could you have a country without a Temple? How would you be able to worship God? Building, nation and religious understanding were inextricably bound together. And the same is true for many Christians even today.

What I would like you to do now is look around this church building we're in. It's very familiar to us. Obviously it was put up to reflect and serve a particular sort of Christianity, so it has a pulpit rather than an altar, because we are a people who place a high value on the preached word of God; it has pews and a gallery so we can all see, hear and sing; it has a communion table, a font (and a baptistery under the platform) because we think that these two sacraments are important things; and its decoration is abstract because the people who put it up didn't want to go back to what they saw as Catholic idolatry and they certainly didn't want anyone to link them with the burgeoning Oxford Movement in the Church of England.

And this building says more. Its predecessor, the Tacket Street Meeting House, was a simple structure, one much more suited to congregational worship where expression was allowed for all men and women to give ministry. But this building subtly endorses the class structure of its day by making the gallery seats just that little bit narrower than the pews downstairs - and also by the way that you can't get to those seats from inside the church. Most important, its grey stonework, its fine organ, its Gothic tracery, indeed its sheer size, indicated the growing confidence of Nonconformist Christianity in Victorian England. This church was designed to impress, to say, "We can compete on equal terms with the Anglicans now: we've arrived!"

So that's what the building says about our faith. But have you ever thought how much this building has shaped your understanding of God himself? - for much of what we know about him has been taught to us, not openly in words or songs, but quietly, simply because of the way the building makes us do things. For instance, the pews all face forward, which means you look at the pulpit, not at each other. Does this say that faith is an individualistic thing? We have an organ: so does this tell us that there are proper and improper ways of worshipping? And, for many of you, this building has sentimental value: this is where you were married, your children were baptised here, this was the place where you said farewell to a loved one. Above all, I hope this was a place where you met with God through prayer, where your faith developed. These associations are precious.

Having said that, I realise that there are some people here today who have already had to face the pain of being prised from a valued place of worship and then seeing it razed to the ground, just like the Jews saw their Temple being reduced to rubble in AD 70. Those of you whose roots were in the Crown Street Presbyterian Church and Turret Green Baptist Church know that those buildings are no more; it can't have been easy to take the decisions to close and join the Christians on this site. Yet it may also have freed you to see God in a way that you would not have been able to do if you had simply stayed put. That bitter pain of moving may well have freed you from linking God too closely to one place and its history. You can travel forward again.

This building is iconic of Christ Church. Indeed, to many people, it is Christ Church, and if you tell them that you worship here you quite probably say, "You know, it's that grey stone building on Tacket Street". But may I remind us all that God does not live in this place; it can never be the dwelling-place of God in the way that the Jews thought that God lived in the Temple. And, although the building is certainly useful to us, and helps us in both our worship and our mission, it must never be confused with the Church itself. For, as you all know, the true Church is the people and not the place. If God lives anywhere, it must be

within our hearts and souls and minds.

As you know, this year marks the 150th anniversary of this building. In January 1858 the builders were just putting in the finishing touches before it was brought into use. The opening ceremony in that month must have been a great occasion both for the town and for the church - although there must have been tears shed, too, as the old Meeting House had its faithful friends. But now it is getting old. As a Christian community, we are having to think seriously about how we can best use it in the future. We are likely to have to spend an amount well into six figures in order to refurbish the stonework, which is really just an exercise in keeping things as they are now. While rejoicing in all that this place means to us, and continuing to spend money on necessary repairs and upkeep, we will have to start asking God to show us his ways for the future.

And there is a precedent. If you were listening carefully to our first reading today, you will have realised that God was actually rather ambivalent about King David's plan to build him a Temple now that the Jews had finished wandering through the desert and were settled in one place. His reply through the prophet Nathan was not too encouraging: what he basically said was, "Well, I've managed quite happily with a tent for the last four centuries since Moses, so I'm not really that excited by the idea. But it's a nice thought, so go ahead if you want to". And I think the reason God was cautious about the building of the Temple was because he knew that people would begin to understand him only in terms of the structure. Ultimately the omnipotent God would be tamed in people's minds as someone who lived inside that place, not as the Almighty Creator and Redeemer.

And there was something more. A tent is portable and speaks of pilgrimage; but a building is permanent and static. The children of Israel had made a journey - literally and in their faith - from Egypt to Canaan, from Memphis to Jerusalem. During that time they had relied on God to lead them, and to travel with them. But now things had settled down. The pilgrim life was over. Was there a danger that the people would become settled in their ways and gently stop depending on God? There most certainly was; and we run precisely the same risk today. For we are still a pilgrim people. We must never get stuck in one place.

In a fortnight we will be reaching this building's 150th anniversary; and I hope it will be a good time. Those of you who are church members will know that we have some fairly minor (but remarkably expensive!) plans under consideration to make it more suitable for worship and witness today. But, good as those are, we still have to think seriously about the big practical issues that confront us as a church fellowship on this site and in this place. Those questions will occupy a lot of our thinking over the next two months, and I have no idea at present as to how God may speak to us.

But I do believe that he will speak, if we are prepared to listen. I also believe that he will stay amongst us, if we invite him to. For whether we move or whether we stay, God will not abandon us. What a good thing he doesn't care very much about the buildings we put up to house him. What's important for him is to get out of those buildings and into his world - which he will do as long as he lives in our lives.