

A Glorious Building

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Preacher: Paul Barker

[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of November 2002. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled A Glorious Building and is based on 1 Kings chapter 8. Well let's pray. Today, having heard such a long reading of the opening of the Temple of Jerusalem, let's pray that God helps us to understand something from that. Heavenly Father, we thank you that your word both informs our mind and reforms our lives so that we may be more conformed to the image of Jesus Christ.

We pray now that you'll help us, that your word will take root in us, bearing fruit for your glory. Amen. Twenty days to go. I'm counting them down. I've been counting them down for 80 days so far. Twenty days to go to the grand opening of our new buildings.

As I said at the beginning, I'm sorry we're not in there tonight. We were this morning, but it'll be too dark in there tonight. And on that day, the 30th of November, at 4.30 in the afternoon, we'll have the official opening and dedication of the building.

[1 : 21] And it'll be a great occasion. I'm not going to promise a long, majestic procession of all sorts of people in fancy robes. You won't get that. But there will be some dignitaries here. The Archbishop, the Mayor, me.

And there'll be various religious actions, although not sacrifices. Although there might be, if there are any volunteers.

There'll be many words, I'm sure. And there'll be long prayers, I'm sure. And people will come from far and wide, even East Doncaster. And it'll be a grand occasion.

But not as grand as the opening of the Temple of Jerusalem in the time of King Solomon, around about 950 BC. So that's before most of you were born.

And that was some building. It was King David's dream to build a temple for God. But he was prohibited by God from doing it, though he planned it in detail. And the job of building it was King Solomon, his son's achievement.

[2 : 23] It was many years in the planning. We've only been planning four years for our building. The Temple of Jerusalem took seven years to build. Ours has taken eight months and hopefully 20 more days.

Or 19 more days. And theirs was lavished with gold and all sorts of expensive materials. Ours is a little bit plainer, trying to keep the cost and budget under control.

Solomon's Temple was lavish, though not huge. Bigger than our combined churches we've worked at this afternoon. Thirty metres long and ten metres wide.

Yet it was the largest building in the ancient world dedicated to just one God. There were bigger temples in other places in the ancient world, but they were all dedicated to a whole range of gods or a pantheon of gods.

The opening of the temple is in this chapter 1 Kings 8, a long chapter, as you've heard. A lot of detail is given to the opening of the temple. It's clearly an important event for the Old Testament.

[3 : 21] It began with a long procession of all the officials, the tribal leaders, the elders and the priests of the whole of the nation of Israel from far and wide. And the purpose of the procession was to carry up from lower down in the town of Jerusalem in what was called the City of David, up further the rise towards Mount Zion to the temple that Solomon had built and to carry there the Ark of the Covenant.

The Ark of the Covenant is basically a box, a bit like the size of a suitcase or something that you might put at the end of your bed. And in it was simply two pieces of stone.

On the stone were written, by the finger of God, the Ten Commandments that God had given Israel around about 400 years before the temple was dedicated to the people of Israel in the time of Moses at Mount Sinai.

A summary, if you like, of the law and expectation of God for his people. Though the Ark was just really a box, it was gold-plated on the top and it had gold statues of cherubim on either end facing each other with their wings outspread.

And it was the footstool for God's throne. God, in a sense, reigned between the cherubim above the Ark. The Ark was like the footstool for God's throne.

[4 : 37] And this procession took the Ark from the temporary temple, what was called the tabernacle, basically like a church in a tent, up the hill, maybe half a kilometre, and into the new temple built by Solomon.

And that was the key sort of procession of the dedication of the Jerusalem temple. And early on in that reading, you might have picked up, when the Ark was placed in the holiest place of the temple, at one end of it, the most holy place or the holy of holies, we're told that when the priests came out of the holy place, having put the Ark in there, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

Now, I'm not expecting on the 30th of November that our church building is filled with smoke and cloud, although there are fire hose reels all over the place, just in case that does happen. The cloud, though, is a symbol of the presence of God.

Earlier in Old Testament history, as the people of Israel came from Egypt, where they'd been enslaved, under the leadership of Moses, for 40 years through the wilderness desert towards the promised land of Israel, they were led by a cloud during the day, which became a pillar of fire at night.

The cloud was a symbol of God's presence to guide them to the promised land. And it's made explicit here because it's not just the cloud, but then it's explained as the glory of the Lord fills the house of the Lord.

[6 : 06] Earlier on, again, in the time of Moses, when the people of Israel were in the wilderness at Mount Sinai, having been given the laws of God, including the Ten Commandments, we're told that they built their tent-type tabernacle to worship in and make sacrifices around, and the glory of the Lord filled it at the end of the book of Exodus.

So now we have two symbols of the presence of God, the cloud or the glory. One and the same thing, it seems, a cloud that is dazzling and bright, symbolising that God is present.

And that's the first thing that's really important in this passage about the dedication of the temple, because in the end it's about God. And the thing about God, firstly, is that God is present. God is present in the midst of his people.

He's not remote or aloof. Don't have to shout out to God like some of the other worshippers that the Canaanite gods had to do in the time of Elijah to try and rouse their God from sleep or going to the toilet or something.

God's not remote or aloof. He is present in the midst of his people. It's what God wants to do. In fact, the Bible begins with a picture of God present in the midst of his people in the Garden of Eden. But their sin meant their expulsion from the Garden.

[7 : 17] Now God has come down to be present again in the midst of his people. That's what heaven will be like. At the centre of heaven is God and the people of God gathered around the throne of God. God present with his people.

That's the first thing that's really important to understand about God. So the temple here is a foretaste of heaven, of God in the middle of his people. And in many respects, this opening of the temple is a high point in the whole of the Old Testament.

Now the people of God have got to the land promised, to the city promised, with the king that's promised, with God's presence in their midst. Now that's quite different from other religions or many other religions.

In many religions, God is ultimately unknowable and certainly remote and removed. But at the heart of Christian faith, the heart of the Bible's faith in God, is that God is a God who is present and not remote.

But secondly, God is a promise-keeping or covenant-keeping or faithful God. The opening words in effect of Solomon in this chapter make that quite clear.

[8 : 27] In verse 15, Solomon says, Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, who with his hand has fulfilled what he promised with his mouth to my father David. Solomon is saying there that the temple that they're dedicating is God keeping a promise.

Because the generation before, when Solomon was not king and his father David was king, God promised David that there would be a temple, a house for the Lord. And so when it's being dedicated by Solomon, he's saying, it's not just my achievement that's done this, this is God keeping his promise.

But also Solomon goes on in verse 20 to say that God is keeping his promise because Solomon is fulfilment of promise, not just the temple. Verse 20 says, Now the Lord has upheld the promise that he made, for I have risen in the place of my father David.

I sit on the throne of Israel as the Lord promised. Now both of these ideas, the temple and Solomon himself as fulfilment of promise, refer back to the preceding book in the Old Testament, a book called 2 Samuel.

There, when David was king, God promised David two things, two houses in effect, a house for the Lord, that is a temple, and a house of David, that is a dynasty, like we say about the kings and queens of England, the house of Tudor or the house of Windsor.

[9 : 43] So God promised two things, a house of David, Solomon is fulfilment of that, a house for the Lord, the temple is fulfilment of that. And so the basis of the dedication ceremony and the basis of Solomon's prayers to God is that God is a promise-keeping or we might say covenant-keeping God because the promises God makes are not just sort of rash promises like we sometimes might make.

Oh yeah, I'll promise to do that tomorrow, but then we never do. God's promises are firm and solemn. A covenant is the word for them. That is a solemn pledge of doing something.

The closest I think we have is in a marriage ceremony where the groom and the bride sign a document. It's in a sense a covenant of pledge and promise and vow between two people.

That's what God does with his people. He makes promises, firm, secure promises, a covenant promise, and he pledges to keep it. And Solomon says, what's most important is not just that God promises things, but that he keeps his promise.

And so the temple and Solomon's own kingship are evidence of God keeping his promises. Now that's a key aspect of God's character that makes God unique.

[10 : 58] See, no other God in the ancient or modern world is like that. God who keeps promises. But the God of the Bible is a promise-keeping God. So he's not unknowable because he actually declares his hand by making a promise and then keeping it.

We know what God is on about because he promises us things. That's what the Bible's for, to tell us what the promises of God are and to show us the evidence that God is reliable to keep those promises as well.

God never lets his people down. So Solomon goes on at the beginning of his prayer in verse 23 and says, O Lord God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on the earth beneath keeping covenant and steadfast love for your servants who walk before you with all their heart. the covenant that you kept for your servant, my father David, as you declared to him. You promised with your mouth and have this day fulfilled with your hand. That is, God is unique, incomparable because he is a covenant-keeping God.

And that's what Solomon is acknowledging in verses 23 and 24. It's the basis of his prayer. It's a basis of thanksgiving. You see, in many religions, the adherents of those religions approach their God with fearfulness and uncertainty.

[12 : 14] Usually they're trying to appease what they might detect as the anger of their gods or they're trying to win their favour. Often people of other religions approach their gods fearfully because they regard their God as a bit hard to predict, unpredictable, unreliable, capricious, fickle.

But not so the Christian faith, the faith of the Bible. God is utterly reliable and trustworthy and predictable because he makes promises and he keeps those promises. So we know where we stand with God.

And as Solomon prays with confidence in this chapter, like so many other people in the Bible who pray to God, we also can pray with confidence knowing who God is, what he's on about, what his character's like.

So God is present and God is faithful, covenant-keeping. The third thing about God, though, stands in a bit of tension with the first thing is that God is transcendent.

Now the word transcendent means that God is in effect sovereign over everything, bigger than all things. Now Solomon expresses this in verse 27. But will God indeed dwell on the earth?

[13 : 20] Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house I've built. Now on the one hand, Solomon says this is a house where God will dwell. On the other hand, he's saying God's too big for this house.

He can't even fit on earth, let alone in the temple of Jerusalem. So what's going on here? The idea is that God is transcendent, bigger than the heavens and the earth, sovereign and supreme over all things, everywhere, in every age.

Yet it's true that God somehow is present in the temple, but he's not limited therein. He's not restricted by the walls of a building, even a temple in Jerusalem.

Later on, when Solomon prays his prayer, asking God to heed the prayers that he pray and that the people will pray in the future, he says people will come to this temple and pray or turn to this temple and pray and then he says, hear from heaven.

Not hear from the holy place, hear from heaven because that's where God ultimately is. Yes, his name dwells in the temple. Yes, God does dwell there in a special way, present in the midst of his people.

[14 : 26] But God nonetheless remains transcendent and sovereign over all things, resident in heaven. Now again, that makes God unique. In the ancient worlds, the gods that people worshipped had limited jurisdiction or territory.

So in the ancient Greco-Roman world, the ancient Middle Eastern world that Israel was in in the time of Solomon or later on, or even in our modern world in many respects, there are gods who are limited in what they do.

There's a God of fertility or the God of love. If you've got a romance problem, you turn to the God of love. If you want dry day, you turn to the God of sun or if you want some rain to fall, go to the God of rain and so on.

Or if you're in place X, you worship God X and if you go over to this town or city, you worship their God. A God that's got limited jurisdiction, one for that town or country or city, one for this aspect of nature or that aspect.

But not so the God of the Bible. His transcendence means that he's God over everything. Every aspect of life comes under God. Every place in the world comes under God. So later on in Solomon's prayer, he not only prays that when the Israelites pray, God will heed, but that even when foreigners come to the temple, that God may heed them because they too are under this same transcendent God.

[15 : 41] There's not one God for Israel and another God for the people of Egypt and another God for the people of Babylon or Assyria or any other place. It's one God for all. Yahweh, the God of the Old Testament, the God of the Bible, is the God of all people, of all nations, of all tongues and tribes.

Now Israel was not always so welcoming of foreigners and Gentiles as Solomon's prayer indicated. They often had quite a deal of hatred for them and often turned them away. Christians sadly have sometimes been the same.

Sadly in the world, often the Christian faith is regarded as a Western religion. Well, I mean, thankfully we can look around tonight and see that that's not true. It's certainly not true in the world. The God whom we worship is the God of all peoples. He's the God of Arabs as well as the God of Jews and Chinese and Indians and Australians and English and Scots and everyone of everywhere. One God for all.

Sovereign, transcendent over all. And so Solomon's prayer to invite the foreigner in to pray to the God of Israel is again a foretaste of heaven where the picture we get at the end of the Bible is of God on his throne in the centre of heaven and people of every tongue and nation and tribe and race gathered around the throne of God and together praising his name and singing his praise.

[16 : 59] So God is present, God is faithful, God is transcendent and finally God is merciful. If a holy God is to dwell in the midst of people all of whom are sinners as Solomon acknowledges in verse 46 then either those people are going to be consumed in God's holy fire or God is going to have to be merciful and thankfully it's the latter.

God's mercy underpins this dedication ceremony. At the beginning and the end of the chapter there is reference to the large number of sacrifices, so many that even the outer altar court had to be dedicated because there were so many sacrifices, too many for the main altar it seems.

120,000 sheep and 22,000 oxen. Now on our opening day we'll have some animals here but they'll be for pony rides not for sacrifices. You'll be pleased to know. All those animals sacrificed.

An extraordinary thing because you see mercy does not come cheap. Mercy costs. If mercy was free and cheap and had no cost associated with it then God would be compromising his holiness. But mercy is costly. Animal sacrifices were a regular feature of the ancient temple which was more like an abattoir than a cathedral. Mercy doesn't come cheap.

[18 : 27] Now mercy does come without sacrifice because throughout Solomon's prayer he acknowledges that if somebody sins or this sin happens or that sin happens hear from heaven and forgive he says. No reference there to sacrifice because he knows the mercy of God is at the heart of God's character.

But mercy is costly and ultimately God pays the price. So the God that Solomon is worshipping and the dedication of the temple is also the God whom we worship.

A God who is present in the midst of his people but yet nonetheless transcendent. A God who is covenant keeping and faithful and a God who is merciful.

And that is ample grounds for giving thanks on Thanksgiving Sunday to a God who is like that.

Indeed if God were not like that we'd have no reason to give thanks at all.

But within 400 years of this dedication ceremony of the temple of Jerusalem the temple was destroyed by the Babylonians 587 BC.

[19 : 38] Perhaps God had broken his promise after all. Perhaps God was no longer present in the midst of his people after all. Perhaps God had given up on being merciful.

Well they rebuilt the temple after 70 more years rededicated in 515 prompted by prophets Haggai and Zechariah among others and it lasted a little longer lasted almost 600 years.

But then in the time of the Romans not long after Jesus' death and resurrection that temple too was destroyed by the Romans. Has God given up on his promises?

Is God no longer present? Maybe he's not transcendent. Maybe the gods of the Romans and Greeks has defeated this God. Is God no longer merciful? Abandoning his people to his wrath without mercy.

When God promised King David that David's son would build a house for the Lord Solomon rightly saw that he was in dedicating this temple here seeing fulfillment of that promise.

[20 : 41] but we assume that little did Solomon let alone David realize the full extent of the promise of God because nearly a thousand years after the promise was made to David King David's greater son built a greater temple.

Jesus Christ said destroy this temple the stone one in Jerusalem of the day and I'll raise it in three days. And John the writer of the gospel tells us that Jesus was referring not to a building but to his body after the resurrection because King David's greatest son is Jesus Christ and the temple that he builds is not with bricks and mortar but his body risen from the dead and uniting those who trust in him in that same body.

More than steel and stone and stained glass the temple of God is a living entity of the people of God built into the living Lord Jesus Christ.

You see Jesus is the fulfilment of the promise. Jesus is God present in the midst of his people. Jesus crucified is the mercy of God. Jesus is proof of God's covenant keeping faithfulness to promise and the ascended Jesus Christ is transcendent Lord over all.

So meeting with God is not about going to a building but about going to a person Jesus Christ. Indeed meeting with God is no longer limited to a holy building or a holy ground.

[22 : 26] In many senses there is no such thing anymore. Meeting God is about meeting Jesus and God Jesus people in his name. Well one day not only this building that we're in that's nearly 140 years old and the new building that's minus 20 days old will be gone.

All the work that we've put in in planning for four years building for eight years raising money to pay for it it'll be gone one day. Either it'll be consumed when this world passes away when Jesus returns or in another generation it'll be renewed restored extended yet again.

But the living temple of Jesus Christ will never be destroyed. It will endure even that final day. In 20 days this new building complex will be completed but the real temple is far from finished.

There are many more people yet to be built into the living body of Jesus Christ and that is our gospel task and that is why we build the building. Not as a holy ground whereby we can meet with God though we meet with Jesus when we gather with his people wherever we meet and under his word.

But our gospel task is that the building might be a facility so that many other people may be built into him. so let us indeed give thanks for God's presence in our midst for his covenant keeping faithfulness to promise for his transcendence over all and his mercy extended to us all of which are focused on the Lord Jesus Christ.

[24 : 09] But let us also at the same time fulfil our gospel task so that God's glory will not fill our building with smoke and cloud but that God's glory will fill many lives.

Amen. Amen.