

Sermon - A Living Temple

25-6-23 (DC)

1 Peter 2 v 4-12

This is the third in our series of looking at what it means to be church, to be Christians in a secular age and country.

Living Temple - Find this a fascinating subject – not least because Ali and I were fortunate enough to visit Egypt earlier this year and see the remains in the Valley of the Kings and elsewhere. What I thought was pretty much a land of tombs and pyramids actually turned into a myriad of temples in all sorts of shapes and sizes. In fact, by the end of ten days we were pretty much ‘templed’ out. It’s a complicated world when there are so many mythical gods entwined with the Pharaohs and Kings over millennia. I will try not to ‘temple’ you out!

One of the things our Egyptian guide really helped us with, was showing that despite their differences of build and age, the overall layout and purpose of the temples had a common structure over thousands of years.

All the temples had an outer courtyard where the common people did their business and met with the priests, then there was a separate courtyard for the priests to do their priestly things. And finally, there was a special inner sanctum that could be a burial chamber or other super sacred space which only the chosen few were allowed into.

This concept of the three-level temple seems to be common across a number of cultures, faiths and continents, so much so that it’s probably reasonable to conclude that it reflects some innate human traits as to how humankind grapples with relating to their gods and rulers, common people, priests and ultra sacred elites/rulers. Even in popular culture today, we see this structure in films like the Indiana Jones stories such as the Temple of Doom. Storming the inner sanctum with all its clever defences makes for good entertainment.

The Old Testament scholars amongst you will I’m sure have noticed the similarities of this Egyptian temple structure with that of the Jewish temple in Jerusalem. If we look at the Herodian temple in Jerusalem, the temple familiar to Christ and the early Church – the one where he threw out the moneylenders and traders, we can see that it also had the outer courtyards for the people – but with some division between Jews and non-Jews, then a priestly courtyard or inner temple and then the sanctuary for the elite plus of course the Holy of Holies within it, separated by its curtains, into which only the High Priest could go once a year to seek in the presence of God the atonement for the sins of the nation’s people.

Common to all these ancient temples was that they were built not just for worshipping God or gods, but were also for the process of government and social control. The key thing was that they were big and imposing, even intimidating - and were a visual symbol and place of governing power and control in pre-democratic ages when religion and power were totally intertwined in everyday life. Our secular separation of civil governance and religion is a relatively new phenomenon – even in our own country you don’t have to go too far back to get into the divine right of kings to rule – as parts of King Charles’s coronation service still showed.

So, is the Living Temple we are talking about today some sort of virtual imitation of the physical temples of ancient, or even modern times. Is it to be imposing and associated with power and governance of the population as much as religious worship? Does it reflect and empower the elites and divisions in society: Rulers, us and them outside. Should it have a Holy of Holies, a priestly inner courtyard and an outer courtyard for the people. To whom is it dedicated? What does it look like and do?

In the very early years of the Christian Church we saw the explosion out from the Jewish core of believers; they had been dominated by the importance of the temple and tradition, but now with a bit of a struggle, this new faith, our faith, was and is for all: Jew and Gentile. Our faith is based on the spirit of holy living in our hearts and actions rather than the strictures of the Jewish law or a Holy Temple. Why this change? Well, it's Jesus of course, his almost revolutionary teaching and ministry, his death and resurrection. This tectonic shift in our understanding of the nature of God in Christ cannot be underestimated or possibly even fully understood. Nor must we forget the giving of the Holy Spirit empowering his followers.

It's no accident that one of the key gospel narratives on the moment of death of Jesus on the cross was that, amidst the earthquakes and the darkness, the raising of the dead.....the curtain of the Jewish temple was torn in two from top to bottom. The curtain shielding that sacred Holy of Holies, through which only the High Priest could go through.

From that moment, being in the presence of God and having a relationship directly with him is for everyone, without the need for high priestly intercession on our behalf. The tearing of the curtain symbolises the end of the old understanding of man's relationship with God. We no longer need to go to a temple or have priests intercede on our behalf to see God.

So, if the old physical temple has lost its meaning and purpose, then what replaces it? This is where we get into the metaphors of building and the concept of a living temple. What is it, what does it look and feel like? What is our role in it?

Some may be familiar with the Apostle Paul asking the Corinthians, 'do you not know that your body is a temple of the Holy Spirit within you?' (1 Corinthians 6:19). Through the vagaries of the English language, this is often interpreted at the individual person level, but it actually meant in the plural too, to the body of Christians in Corinth.

We are getting to the heart of the Living Temple. Yes, it's the body of Christ, the community of Christian believers, but with God dwelling not just with us, but in us and we in him. We with Christ in us are the Living Temple. This temple is not just dedicated to Christ, it is the spiritual and practical manifestation of God's plan for Holy Living. It's a temple not fixed in time or place, but exists past present and future in all places where Christ is to be revealed with and by his people, the body of Christ - Us the Church. In the Living Temple, God and his people are inseparable.

So, the building of this temple is not a one-off job that can be finished at some point in time (at least this side of the second coming of Christ). It is ongoing work, as generation after generation follow each other as the body of Christ. It doesn't have to be reinvented in every generation but it does have to be constantly built and maintained over every generation of the body of Christ.

So, how with Christ do we build it? Well, this is a bricklayers' guide to building the Living Temple.

Firstly – get the plan and understand it.

Study the scriptures, absorb Christ's teaching, pray and discuss it with others, keep referring to it as you build.

Secondly - lay the corner or foundation stone.

Our reading this morning from 1 Peter hits the nail on the head but we need to understand the purpose of a cornerstone or foundation stone. As any bricklayer will tell you, if you get the first stone wrong in a wall then it all goes horribly wrong. The first stone and how it is laid is going to set the very orientation of the building. You start at the corner and build out and up, always using that stone as the base reference – it takes much of the weight, it must not collapse, and from it the structure takes its form and strength.

So, Peter reminds us that Christ is the Cornerstone of the Living Temple. He had been rejected by men but instead chosen by God for that role. Our Living Temple has a firm foundation who is godly and not a human choice. In an age where populism and cults of the personality – be it Trump, Lewis Capaldi or even President Putin - where such personalities can lead to huge followings of people and cultural energy – we are reminded that they are flawed and not fit for purpose as a foundation of faith. Whilst our temple is for all people, it is not an exercise in populism or popularity, something we need to remind ourselves of when we feel that as a Church we are failing. If we think we are rejected by the rest of society, don't forget that our cornerstone, our foundation stone was himself rejected by men – but chosen by God, just as we are. He is our hope.

Thirdly - build the following stones strong and true.

A bricklayer makes constant checks with his spirit level, not just checking that things are level but that they are kept straight and vertical in all dimensions. This is essential when all the stones are not the same size. Spiritually, this means we make constant reference back to scripture as we build and don't just plough on regardless, once we have started.

Who are the stones? Well, us – as Peter describes in our reading – a chosen people a royal priesthood, a holy nation, a people belonging to God.....living stones being built into a spiritual house.....urged to be aliens and strangers in the wider world... living such good lives amongst the pagans that though they accuse us of doing wrong, they may see our good deeds and glorify God on the day he visits us. What do living stones and good lives look like? Well, there are a few sermons there but we could start with the fruits of the Spirit dwelling within us: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control.

Fourthly – trowel on with a well-mixed mortar.

Unconditional love and forgiveness mixed with the Holy Spirit. These are the things that cement us together, the unique characteristics of Christ within us.

Finally, in the bricklayers' guide - wear a safety helmet.

The human part of the building process is not always perfect, stones get dropped, put in the wrong place, scaffolding fails - we can get hurt and be disappointed with part of the project. How we handle the mistakes and difficulties is as important as getting things right first time. Steadfast builders will move around the project as circumstances dictate because they survive the difficulties and know the direction of the overall plan.

And one final reflection on this temple we are building, we have been concentrating on us, the priestly people – the living stones - on how the priestly courtyards are now merged with the Holy of Holies and what it looks like, but the outer courtyard is just as important. As an Evangelist, I would say that wouldn't I, but in our Matthew reading we see Jesus setting that example and getting the flack for doing so. We must never ever forget that the Temple is for all, some may never see or experience it except from the outer courtyard, but the living temple is planned and built with a doorway to the inner courtyard that is built to let people see and go through, not to keep people out.

We have to be so careful that we build to the entire plan and not just the bit we live in. What is the perception of our Living Temple project from those in the courtyard.

Our Living Temple must be fit for purpose and meeting today's issues through Christ- centred living; Christ must be our foundation and not a quest for popularity. Let's constantly check God's plan and purpose for the Church, the Living Temple in which he dwells as Christ. Yes, let's check that we don't fall into the trap of being a religious National Trust primarily preserving intact the buildings and practices of the past, or even an English Heritage preserving the ruins.

Our Living Temple, the Church, will serve its purpose if:

- We stick to God's Plan
- Christ is the sure foundation
- We build with bricks laid strong and true
- Binding us together is love and forgiveness and the Holy Spirit.
- We accept things at times go wrong, but critically it's how we deal with imperfections and disappointments.
- We never forget that a fundamental part of the Temple is the outer courtyard with an ever-open door to let people in and not keep them out.

Led us build to the glory of God. Amen.