

2 Samuel 7:1-14a

David's House

Faith in buildings

Ever since the union of the denominations in 1929, the Church of Scotland has had too many buildings. Arguably, that was true even in the heyday of church attendance in the 1950's and it is most assuredly true today. The General Trustees watchword is "Well equipped spaces in the right places" and the Mission Planning Act passed by the General Assembly makes it abundantly plain that buildings are for MISSION and that as we revise all our Presbytery Plans to take account of greatly reduced ministerial numbers (and the money to pay for them) buildings will only have a place in the scheme of things in so far as they contribute to the prime goal of mission. Hopefully, we will be able to ensure that those remaining (or in some cases new build replacements) will be fitted out so that they are "well equipped" – for missional purposes as well as worship ones. Buildings have to be seen as tools for mission – places where faith is exercised, in which and from which, the people of God engage in mission to the glory of God. We can enjoy our buildings, we can appreciate them; undoubtedly over the years personal connections and past experiences within them will lead to us have great affection for them and a deep sense of loss when we are deprived of them (even as in the past year that has been temporary) BUT while we might exercise our faith within them, our faith must not be in the buildings themselves. Our faith is in the Lord who made heaven and earth, who loved the world so much that he sent his Son to be our Saviour.

David puts down roots

Possibly because he had spent much of his time on the move – as a young shepherd, on the run fleeing from Saul, or engaged in military expeditions, when he gets the chance David seeks to put down roots and settle in Jerusalem. He builds a house for himself, a palace, and ensures that he and his court are comfortable and secure. Initially, he is wary about building a temple – but he make overtures in that direction, approach Nathan the prophet for advice – which, initially is favourable, but on prayer and reflection leads him to advise David that God plans for others in his family to build God's house – Solomon the Temple, and perhaps too an allusion to his descendants through to Jesus. As last week, there were probably other reasons for David wanting to build a Temple to replace the tent like temporary structure that housed the ark of the Covenant, the perceived dwelling place of the Almighty. It would signal to all and sundry a further step in the settlement and security of God's people. No longer a wandering people, on the move, sometimes at the mercy of their opponents – David wished to proclaim that they had arrived, they had made it, this was home – and God was to make his home with his people – right there in Jerusalem – the fortified city, a place of security and peace – peace that he, David, the warrior king, had won for them. Jerusalem was symbolic, it was, even when the Babylonians laid siege to it and removed the people into exile; it was much later when Rome laid it bare and destroyed the Temple; let's face it, it is symbolic and, sadly, a source of conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians now. But while there was probably some

genuine desire on David's part that God might have a house, as the king had, I suspect too that he had his own motives in wishing for a permanent temple, a structure that would announce to his people that God was with them, the Almighty had his home among them, they were safe and secure in Jerusalem, never again to be wanderers. That sounded good, it probably made David look good too – but history was to teach that it was a forlorn hope.

Sometimes God uproots

One lesson that David didn't pick up on (and which, to be fair, countless numbers of God's people down through the centuries to this very day haven't picked up on either) is that God cannot be bound by our preconceptions nor confined to a building – be it a Temple, grand cathedral or humble parish church. We may make plans, well intentioned, possibly faith based plans – but it is all too easy for us to shape these from our own assumptions. God isn't confined either to our way of thinking or to our treasured buildings. Both have their place – we are given brains and intelligence with which to think, we're given spiritual insight and feelings with which to follow God's lead and sensitivity to take account of the needs of others but that will never exhaust the mind of God and sometimes even our best endeavours will fall short – and God will “upset” our plans. Buildings have their uses and some of them can even be inspiring. Even the plainest of them can still foster deep worship and spirituality and make room for encouragement and deep relationship among God's people as well as with the Lord himself. But when all said and done we need to remember that God is with his people whether we have access to a particular building or any at all. The prophets reminded their people that God had been with their ancestors in the wilderness wanderings; he had been with them in exile even as God's people were asking how they could praise him in a foreign land; David had known God with him in his desperate time on the run from Saul and down through the centuries God's people have known the comfort and strength of the Lord in face of oppression. Have we not known that God has been with us these past 15 months even though, for much of that time our churches were closed? Jesus said (and meant) “I will be with you always to the end of the age”. And, in different ways, we have known that to be true. Life is not a bed of roses; sometimes awful things happen and our faith can come under real strain, but as the question in the Footprints poem – where were you Lord when I was at my lowest? The answer comes back “Those were the times when I was carrying you”. God will not automatically fall in with our plans and sometimes we will take that badly. For various reasons it wasn't God's plan that David should build the temple (perhaps because it might have gone to his head, possibly because it would have been more for his glory than God's) but he had the right idea – Solomon his son would get that job and, in a deeper, more profound, spiritual sense the “house of the Lord” would be build, not in wood and stone, but in the lineage and generations to follow so that Jesus, son of Joseph, was to be called son of David as well as Son of God.

As I have said more than once recently, we are pilgrims on a journey, Jesus has promised to journey with us.

Making Plans

Let me be fair to David. At least he tried to think things through. Planning and strategy were surely strengths that stood him good stead both as a warrior and later as King in a more settled context. Sometimes we focus so much on our here and now, and can be so comfortable with the status quo, that we don't really spend much time giving thought to the future, far less making plans, and still less implementing them. Following on from all that was said last week about change, we really ought to be making plans. Let me give you two brief illustrations from my sea-going days – one, as navigator I prepared many more journeys than were actioned. Nowadays, charts and tracks are displayed on monitors and can be easily amended. In my day, they were drawn in pencil – because time and again adjustments were made. We were en route to Belfast, signalled to divert to Troon or pick up something at Faslane and crew member at Stranraer and then head for Belfast. Waste of effort – not really, as it was always easier to amend a plan that had been carefully prepared than to begin from scratch. Second, weighing anchor, it was always easier first to get some way on the ship before you worried about the direction the ship was heading. Once you got some speed up, the rudder could bite and you could bring the ship round to the intended heading. We have to be willing to make plans but we need to be open to God's leading (and sometime changing our plans) AND sometimes we've to start making some headway, to overcome our inertia and do SOMETHING even in a small missional way, and then we can revise our direction and bring the church round to its true heading. Yes, at times God's plans differ from ours and we need to be alert to the differences and follow his lead but there's still scope for us making plans.

I pray that God will give us wisdom as we work through what needs to be done in shaping the Church of Scotland for the 21st century, post Covid, era maybe especially in ensuring that buildings serve mission rather than hold us to fortune, but that will need to be done sensitively, collaboratively and with a real openness to God's leading, and sense of God's priorities.

May the Lord bless you! Amen.