**24th November 2013**

**Exodus 35.20-29**

Many years ago when I was training to be a minister I had a placement with a Catholic priest in the inner city of Manchester in the district of Moss Side. Moss Side in the eighties and nineties was a virtual no go area because of its high levels of crime, gang violence, deprivation and unemployment. I remember the first time walking into the Catholic Church in the middle of Moss Side and being shocked and startled by the opulence of the church. It had marble statues, ornate features, gold leaf frescoes and the like. My initial reaction was that this was a complete scandal. The church was so rich and wealthy yet was located in one of the poorest wards in the whole of England. My anger was only tempered by my knowledge that Father Phil, the Catholic Priest, lived sacrificially and often went where angels feared to tread.

There was an elderly woman in the church praying with her rosary beads. Eventually she got up to leave, so I introduced myself. She asked whether I liked the church expecting me to say yes and confirm her obvious pride in the place. I said I was struggling with how beautiful and opulent the church was compared with what you see when you go out of the church door. The woman looked at me and said ‘but this is where we come to get a taste of heaven’

The woman I later discovered had lived in Moss Side all her life. She like the rest of the locals struggled with their day to day conditions and environment. I came to a new understanding of the importance of church buildings through that encounter.

Non conformists like ourselves, originally had the high view that God was not confined to a building and that Christ was in each of us so that when we met together Christ was with us. Early non conformists churches where therefore called ‘Meeting Places, rather than churches. They put the emphasis on functionality – being able to see and hear everyone, especially the preacher, rather than aesthetics and whether the architecture and stained glass windows gave a feel for the holy. The early church we told ourselves, didn’t meet in churches they met in people’s homes, broke bread together, shared in the scriptures, prayed and cared for each other. The fellowship was more important than the fabric of the building. We don’t ‘go to church’: the church (the people) gathers in a building, worships together and then the church goes out into the world.

However once the early church became established and became the religion of the Roman Empire it started building elaborate basilicas and churches and cathedrals.

I must admit, I love visiting Cathedrals and churches. I love art, particularly religious art 9and I’ll be giving a talk about that in January – part of the faith and culture series which starts this Thursday looking at faith and film). I don’t believe these things are unimportant and I personally feel that the Reformers threw the baby out with the bath water. Throughout Christian history there has been a tension between worshipping God who is unseen and needing something tangible, something seen, in order to worship God and a place to worship God.

As we end our look at the book of exodus today we see this played out in the story of the Israelites in the wilderness. They have escaped from slavery in Egypt (and how that resonates with the unbelievable story of these three women who were held as slaves for thirty years in London). God had given them many mighty signs to help their belief and to reassure them that he could deliver them from slavery and lead them to something better. Pillars of fire, cloud, ten plagues, parting of the red sea. Pretty convincing stuff.

Last week we looked at the story of how Moses asked to see the face of God. This came about because whilst he had gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments the Israelites down the bottom of the mountain got anxious and worried that both Moses and God had abandoned them alone in the desert. Aaron, who is now in charge, decides in desperation to calm their nerves by getting them to make a golden statue of a calf. Most commentators suggest that the Golden Calf is not another God that the Israelites decide to worship but actually their crude representation of their God, the God of the Israelites. Aaron says in Exodus 32.4 ‘This is your god who brought you up out of Egypt’. They needed to look at something to give them reassurance that God was still with them.

Moses comes down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the second of which says –don’t make graven images – whoops! So God and Moses aren’t too pleased. God wants to give up on them but Moses talks God round and then needs some reassurance himself that God is still with him. Hence the request to see God’s face – which is what I talked about last week. And if you remembered I suggested that we do get glimpses of God’s glory to help sustain our faith at times.

Interestingly though, whilst the Israelites are making their golden calf, God is giving detailed instructions to Moses to build a Tabernacle – a tent of meeting, which would be a physical meeting place where God would be especially present to meet with the priests of the people it will contain an outer courtyard, a holy place in the tent of meeting which would have within it a lampstand, a table holding the bread of presence, an altar for burnt offerings and an ark of the covenant containing the ten commandments and symbolising the presence of God to be their God if they obeyed the commands within.

The ark, a gold-overlaid wooden box, (think Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark) was the focal point within the tabernacle where God’s presence rested. Once a year the high priest was to sprinkle blood on the solid gold cover of the ark as atonement for all Israel’s sins. This cover, which was called the “mercy seat,” where the blood was sprinkled, was the specific place where God could and did meet with humanity.

When you read the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews makes the claim that there is no need for sacrifices now because of the blood of Jesus on the cross. The cross of Christ reassures us that God loves us and forgives us and allows us access to God through Jesus.

There are detailed instructions on how to construct the Tabernacle. It is a well-executed tender document! The tabernacle would emphasise the holiness of God, the otherness of God. Like a sterile environment nothing impure could enter. Only chosen priests who had gone through cleansing rituals were allowed in.

It set the template for centuries of obsessiveness over what was clean and what was unclean for good upright religious people. This still has repercussions today. People think they have to be good and pure to come to church. They think that being holy is boring, sterile, and lifeless. Whereas they well know they are full of passions and emotions that are not clean and wholesome so they think they are ruled out of God’s presence.

Jesus as God in the flesh, would cut through those purity laws by touching lepers and menstruating women and the demonised, and the gentiles, among others and show how a holy God reaches out to others in love and mercy and restores relationship.

The materials used for the making of the Tabernacle and the Ark of the Covenant were to be the very best. No expense was to be spared. Moses at the start of chapter 35 says to the Israelites that each of them is to set aside a contribution to the Lord, gold, silver, copper, fine linen and oils and such like. He asks that people give of their gifts and skills for the building of this tabernacle. There are different jobs to be done and Moses requests that they consider what they can offer.

Our reading picks up the thread. The whole community of the Israelites went out from Moses presence and everyone who was so minded brought of his own free will a contribution to the Lord for the making of the Tent of Meeting and for all its service, and for the sacred vestments. Some individuals were specially chosen; Bezalel and Aholiab were chosen because they were filled with the spirit of God making them especially gifted and skilled to do a special job to make the Ark of the Covenant.

It is tempting to use this passage to make you all wriggle with guilt about what you offer for the work of God. In my preparation for this sermon I googled exodus 35 on the internet and I got a whole host of sermons, by American preachers, laying into their congregations about their apathy and lack of contribution. One guy was even saying his congregation should be giving their tithe, 10% of their income to the lord’s work, but that’s just the minimum. Don’t think you can rest easy at that. The Lord demands the best, the Lord demands more!

He said the Israelites had been in slavery in Egypt. They were once slaves. But when they got liberated they took with them the plunder from Egypt. They went off with the Egyptians gold and silver. From slaves to winning the lottery. Now wandering in the wilderness, tempted to make idols and wander away from God, god now commands them to give up their new found wealth to build the tabernacle.

Notice the people left after Moses told them what God wanted. What conversations do you suppose took place as the people left? “Honey, you know all that gold we took from Egypt? I know the Lord provided it, should we give it back to Him?” “I know we wanted to hang on to this treasure for our kids’ inheritance, but what greater inheritance can we give them but a legacy to the Lord?”

I can get cynical at times. I can sniff a whiff of some preacher building his own kingdom here and ensuring he has his own yacht to sail ion his days off.

That’s not my style. I don’t like sailing anyway! Seriously I don’t do stick I much prefer carrot. I well know the demands you have on you for time, for money for jobs and homes. I think it’s amazing the amount of people who offer their gifts and time for the work of this place. So I’m not going to bash you – but rather thank you for all that you do give. In this church we talk together at church meetings about our needs and leave it for people to respond.

But here are a few points about this passage that may be of help for our consideration:

I. THERE WAS A TIME OF CHALLENGE 35:4-5
*“And Moses spoke to all the congregation of the children of Israel, saying, “This is the thing which the LORD commanded, saying: (5) ‘Take from among you an offering to the LORD. Whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it as an offering to the LORD: gold, silver, and bronze;”*Moses came to the people and said, “ I have a message for you from God. I want you to build a house for worship.” In the rich history of the Jewish people this was an historic moment. God had never before directed a house to be built for worship. But now he gave them the privilege of building a Tabernacle for worship during their wilderness journey. God could have miraculously presented them with the Tabernacle. He had parted the Red Sea and miraculously provided for food and water for the million Israelites. But when it came time to construct the place of worship God invited them to participate. There is a truism that only when something costs us do we appreciate it. and that facing, meeting and overcoming the challenges of life make the life of faith vital and alive.

II. THERE WAS A TIME OF CONSECRATION

A. The Giving was from a Willing Heart.
35:5
*“Take from among you an offering to the LORD. Whoever is of a willing heart, let him bring it as an offering to the LORD: gold, silver, and bronze;”*
35:21-22
*“Then everyone came whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and they brought the LORD’S offering for the work of the tabernacle of meeting, for all its service,*
How are we to understand this response? Their hearts are “stirred” and their “spirits” were moved (v. 21). The words translated “heart” and “spirit” both refer to the inner person. The verb translated “stirred’ and “moved” then, refers to some kind of movement on the inside. They did not respond out of guilt or duty, but rather out of love. Joyous excitement was felt by all who were privileged to have a part in building and equipping this handsome sanctuary in accordance with the instructions of God.

This sanctuary was important to the spiritual life of the Israelites.
Does God’s grace stir our hearts and move our spirits? If so, we have the great and awesome privilege of responding to that grace by giving to God’s cause with our material resources, serving him with our spiritual gifts and obeying him with our whole being. Even in our own day, an eager and highly motivated congregation of a local church is sure to have a significant impact upon its entire community.

B. The Giving was Widespread in Participation
(35:21) “Everyone came…”
(35:22) “Both men and women…”
(35:27) “The rulers brought…”
(35:29) “The children of Israel brought…”
It appears that all the people, men and women, rich and poor, brought gifts of all kinds. Their stirred hearts caused them to seek and search for ways to give, not excuses for why they could not give. Everyone was involved.

C. The Giving was Wonderfully Abundant (23-29)
The response of the people to Moses’ challenge is overwhelming.

III. THERE WAS A TIME OF CONSIDERATION
Exodus 35:20-29(NKJV)
“And all the congregation of the children of Israel departed from the presence of Moses.
It is remarkable to realize that nothing is said of the immediate reception which greeted his words. Perhaps they were amazed, awed, even dumbfounded and that they had not a single word to say. Quietly, gradually, orderly the departed to consider the words of Moses.
This offering was not made on the spur of the moment. This offering was made with prayerful consideration. They retired from his presence to consider the challenge and what their part was to be.

Although we do not know what was said in their tents that night, let me suggest some possibilities. First, they reflected on how God had miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt. When was the last time you reflection on what God has done for you in salvation. Secondly, they remembered how God had miraculously provided for them. (Manna) Finally, they realized how God had marvellously blessed them. As they looked around their tents they realized they possessed nothing that had not been given to them by God. And neither do we.

IV. THERE WAS A TIME OF COMPLETION
Exodus 39:43 (NKJV)
“Then Moses looked over all the work, and indeed they had done it; as the LORD had commanded, just so they had done it. And Moses blessed them.”
After Moses examines the work on the tabernacle, he blesses the people. Interestingly the word translated “examined” is the same word translated “saw” in Gen 1:10, 18, 21, 31. In Genesis 1, the Lord “saw” his creation that it was good and he blessed both the animals and man. We want to look back and say we have completed what we began.

Our Tabernacle constantly needs funds to stop it falling down. Sometimes I wish we only had a tent! The life within it is the most important and that continually needs renewing and sustaining. Our work with children and young people continues to grow and is vital for our life and soon the new youth centre will offer us wonderful opportunities to welcome and outreach to our community.

There have been, there are and there will be many challenges put to this church. May God help us to discern His call. Move us, stir us and give us willing hearts to be part of His work.

Using some material from:

BUILDING THE HOUSE OF GOD” by John Hamby, First Baptist

Exodus 35:4-5, 20-29, 39:43
<http://www.sermoncentral.com/sermons/building-the-house-of-god-john-hamby-sermon-on-church-practices-35944.asp>