**26th April 2015**

[**1 Kings 8: 1, 6, 10-11, 22-30, 41-43**](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=212141491)

Over the last couple of years we have been working our way through gradually through the stories of the Bible. Before Easter we were looking at the story of David. Now we pick up with the story of his son, King Solomon. The story we look at is how he built the temple and his prayer of dedication.

Praying in public is always a risky and fraught business.

Robby Dawkins was speaking at a conference I went to last Saturday and he was making us laugh at how some people stand up and believe they have a message from the Lord but what comes out me all too human. One person quoted the scripture ‘write down Ichabod’: to get the point over that the glory of the Lord has departed from this place. But instead they said the Lord says write down ‘Knicker bocker: the glory of the Lord has departed this place.’

Another said ‘Hear the word of the Lord, just as Noah led his people through the wilderness so will I lead you. There was a moment pause then the person continued: ‘Behold says the Lord: I meant to say Moses not Noah led the people through the wildernesses

Have you ever heard a public prayer in a worship service do "double duty," announcing something to the congregation even while also addressing God in praise, confession, thanksgiving, or petition?

"Thank you, God, for opportunities for fellowship, including the supper coming up this Wednesday at 6 p.m., for which everyone will bring a dish to share..."

"Lord, please watch over our brother George, who was admitted to Gloucester Hospital last night around 11 p.m. with chest pains. He is on Ward 3B. We pray he may receive visitors, though only between 3 and 4.30pm and don’t take any flowers because the Ward doesn’t permit them...”

Communal prayer necessarily and desirably communicates something to the participants as well as to God, awakening our spirits to new needs and hopes. *We have a prayer book that anyone can write in before the service to request prayer for individuals or situations – but if you put names in there please ensure you have permission from the person in question first. That prayer book reminds us, as much as it is a request to God, for the needs of these people.*

Even so, there is a danger that we can allow our prayers to disintegrate into community announcements that we merely allow God to overhear. The clear delineation between Solomon's prayer (verses 22-53) and his two addresses to the assembly that surround it in this chapter (verses 14-21 and 54-61) highlights Solomon's singularity of focus even in this public, liturgical setting.

What is this setting? It is the dedication of the temple in Jerusalem.

To digress for just a moment, Solomon has become king .The son of David and Bathsheba, he became king as a boy, when his mother and the prophet Nathan won the power struggle for succession. He secures his power by killing his rivals as was the way of power struggles in the past. Now you have to kill your political rivals with words.

Most likely you could name just a few things about Solomon.

1. He was renowned for his wisdom – and people cite the story where he judges whose woman a baby belongs to.

2. He had 700 wives, 300 concubines (1 Kings 11:3), and a famous relationship with the queen of Sheba (1 Kings 10).

3. And finally, he built the Temple, the official dwelling place of God for the nation of Israel. We only read a bit of that story in today's lesson, but the previous three chapters detail Solomon's building projects, down to the architectural and decorative elements of the building. There is a comment that Solomon takes seven years to build the temple, but 213 years to build his own palace. A suggestion in scripture of where his true priorities lay.

Having completed construction of the Jerusalem Temple, Solomon now oversees the transfer of the Ark of the Covenant from the Tabernacle into the Holy of Holies in the Temple.

When the ark is rightly situated, a cloud fills the Temple, signifying the presence of the LORD.

This cloud that descends on the Temple is a sign of the presence of the LORD. It is the same cloud that led the Israelites out of Egypt and protected them from the Egyptian army (Exodus 14:19-25). It is the cloud that descended on the top of Mount Sinai when God made a covenant with the Israelites and gave them the Law as a gift (Exodus 24:15-18). This same cloud settled on the Tabernacle, that movable sanctuary, by which the LORD was present with the chosen people throughout their wilderness wanderings (Exodus 40:34-38).

We have had such lovely weather over the last few weeks that it seems strange and disappointing that we have clouds now. But biblically clouds often symbolised the presence of the Lord – so think positively!

What does it mean for God to be present to us? We often pray for God to be present to people, to comfort them. We’re inclined to talk as if God’s presence simply means our sense of God’s presence’. Actually God’s presence may be real when we don’t feel it, and we may feel that God is present when actually God has not shown up or has departed.

Obviously God is invisible in this earthly reality – hence people’s problem: I would believe in God if I could see Him! It is not obvious and needs a step of faith to believe that god is there. Prayer is the way we communicate and discover relationship with God and how god speaks to us and hears us and answers prayer and moves us and guides us and empowers us.

There is the old joke about the person who was climbing up a mountain and tripped and fell over the edge but managed to hang on to a tree branch. Dangling precariously over a drop off hundreds of feet he prayed ‘God if you are there please recuse me’. At that point a fellow walker came past and said take my hand and I will rescue you, but the man said no God is going to rescue me. A helicopter was flying overhead and saw the emergency and hove down low. Grab hold of the winch they shouted but the man said – no God would answer his prayer. At that point the branch snapped and the man plunged to his death. Standing at the gates of heaven he lodged a formal complaint; where were you God when I needed you? God turned up and said ‘what are you doing here? I sent a walker and a helicopter in answer to your prayer!’. God turns up in different guises.

A cloud is a useful symbol for God’s presence. It is a practical means of protecting people from the overwhelming blinding electrifying effect of being in God’s presence. A glory that will only be known in heaven. A holy place. Many believe that certain places are where heaven touches earth. The Celts talked about ‘thin places’ where the boundaries between heaven and earth are at their thinnest.

I don't know if this is more of a statement about God or about people, but there are places which are special, where God seems more obviously and powerfully to dwell. The book of Genesis tells how people found these places in the landscape, mountains and springs and river fords. In the journey out of slavery, the people established a moveable temple, the tent of meeting or Tabernacle.

The temple location itself is a place hallowed for generations before Solomon. Mt. Moriah / Mt. Zion were the traditional location where Abraham went to sacrifice his son Isaac, and where the Lord intervened to substitute a ram for the sacrifice.

Place matters. The temple mount in Jerusalem is much fought over and contested. The Temple itself lasted three centuries, before being stripped and torn down in 586 BCE by the Babylonians. Its destruction led to a spiritual crisis in Israel. If God dwelled in the Temple, did its destruction mean that God had abandoned them?

Herod rebuilt the temple and Jesus predicted the temple would be destroyed. It was in 70 AD by the Romans in retaliation for the Jewish Revolt. 700 years later the Dome of the Rock was built on the Temple Mount at the order of Umayyad Caliph Abd al-Malik and is now the third holiest place for Muslims. Some Jews and some Christians want it back to rebuild a temple there. The longing for the Temple, and for the city in which it stood, is the reason that the Passover meal traditionally ends with the words, "Next year in Jerusalem." It is the reason that the Western Wall (the remaining wall of the Temple Mount that is closest to the site of the Temple) is Judaism's holiest site.

Holy places are often contested places as are churches – what you can and cannot do to them and in them. Everyone has an opinion.

We hallow those places where we have touched the sacred.

Talking about building God a home could imply unsophisticated ideas about God but Solomon makes explicit his awareness that God cannot be contained in a house on earth – neither is God somewhere up in the sky. In verse 27 Solomon prays: *But can God indeed dwell on earth? Heaven itself, the highest heaven, cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built? Yet attend Lord my God to the prayer and the supplication of your servant; listen to the cry and prayer when we pray towards this place’.*

So why is Solomon building a house for God? He speaks of building a house for God’s name. It is a way the Old Testament often seeks to square the circle of affirming that God really is present in the midst of his people while recognising that this is an unsophisticated idea. The name of the person stands for the person. When people talk about me and say ‘that Simon Helme’ it summons up an impression of who I am. When we pray in the name of Jesus it brings home the reality of his presence. . That is so especially with the name of God. The temple will give a focus, a place where people can come and call on the name of the Lord together. It doesn’t exclude calling on the name of the Lord elsewhere – but this is a communal place and focus for the people of God to gather and corporately call on the name of the Lord.

The temple is actually not God’s idea. David was chosen by God and it is David’s idea to have chosen Jerusalem and David’s idea to build a temple and God like many other things in the Old Testament, such as the installation of kings, goes along with it. But God did not originally choose either the city or the temple.

Nevertheless Solomon in his opening prayer gives a shrewd political presentation, to depict his rule as both a continuation of David's greatness and yet also an improvement upon it: the realization of David's vision and God's assurance. He makes political capital out of it. Always be aware of the games people want to play to find their advantage.

Now comes the dedication prayer.

Solomon now turns toward the altar with his hands toward heaven to address God (8:22-53).

Solomon’s wisdom, for which he is famous, is reflected in his prayers at the dedication of the temple. Once again, like [his first interaction with God](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210680719), he doesn’t ask for riches or long life for himself. He doesn’t even ask for victory in battle. In his first interaction with God, he asks for wisdom. At the dedication of the temple, he [asks for justice](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210680841) and for God’s presence with the people, [that God would hear them.](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210680984)

He asks that there be a consequence for evil, and that good actions may lead to good consequences. 31-32). When the people are at war, he says, listen to their prayers and [“do what is right for them.”](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210681069) Solomon doesn’t say, smash their enemies. He prays for what is right. (verses 44-53)

The prayer for justice is a prayer that I relate to. I can’t pray for the destruction of other people. But I can pray for God to help me to grow in wisdom and right action. I can pray for God to help me take responsibility for my role on this planet.

Solomon wants God’s name to be present in the temple, which is effectively the same as God being present in the temple, so that God will hear the prayers of the people and act with justice in response. And not just the people of Israel, but all people, including the “foreigners”. In other translations the word “immigrants” is used. The prayer is not ‘save them, but don’t send them here – send them to Italy…..’ It is respond to the call which the immigrant makes to you, so that like your people Israel all the peoples of the earth may know your fame and fear you and learn that this house which I have built bears your name’ verse 41-43.

The Bible elsewhere tells the people of God to take care of the immigrants who come to your land in distress, the victims of slavery or war. (See for example Lev 19.33-34; Matthew 25.35; Exodus 22.21; Hebrews 13.2). In Deuteronomy, God says to the Israelites: *‘The Lord your God is God. He is no respecter of persons, he is not to be bribed; he secures justice for the fatherless and the widows, and he shows love towards the alien who lives among you, giving them food and clothing. You too must show love to the alien for you once lived as aliens in Egypt’ (*Deuteronomy 10.17-19).

There but for the grace of God go I. And when the immigrant comes to your door, or is swept up on your shore, it is an opportunity to show them the grace of God.

I listened to the question time debate on the TV on Thursday after the EU had had a special summit to discuss the distressing situation of the new boat people – those fleeing the crisis in Libya. None of the main politicians had the courage to say we should take some of these desperate war ravaged people in – so toxic they believe is the subject of immigration to our electorate. There have been constant pleas, particularly from church leaders, to grant asylum to persecuted Christian from Syria. Germany has taken 20,000 in. We have taken 143. Yes we have given lots of money to keep them somewhere else – but our door is closed – and so are our hearts and our souls. May God have mercy on us as much as we pray for God to have mercy on them.

I’m supposed to be neutral as I chair the hustings next week – but I really pray for politicians who have the strength of conviction and belief to sometimes challenge public opinion and not always go along with it - so that they can inspire us to be better people, and a better society.

Solomon prays for God to forgive and to have mercy. He is wise enough to recognise that we are not in a position to assert our rights or argue the toss with God. All we can do is plead for mercy and hope God hears.

Solomon prays that God “[Forgive, act, and repay](http://bible.oremus.org/?ql=210681328)each person according to all their conduct, because you know their hearts. You alone know the human heart.”

The hardest question I have to ask in reflection on this story is: *How may we pray with (and for) wisdom and justice?* Next week on the eve of the election we have an evening of prayer when we will be doing just that – praying for wisdom and justice. Nothing beats putting prayer into practice.

God is present with God's people. God hears prayer and will respond with mercy. Such is the Gospel in this text. The Temple is a sign and a means of that communion with God – yet God who knows our hearts, is not even confined by heaven.

We should remember, though, that in Christ we have been given a new kind of Temple. Jesus knew a God who came to dwell in human flesh. The Apostle Paul spoke of the human body as a temple of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus, in his human body, restored people to health, forgave sins, and led people into eternal life, reconciled with God. And with one another. Jesus built a new temple, the temple we call “church,” where the body of human community is healed and redeemed, where his disciples live together in love.

Place matters. The places where God dwells become holy places. God came among us, revealed in Jesus’ human body, and in the community he gathered.

May we know God’s presence and deepen our relationship with God through prayer.

Simon Helme

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<http://citycalledheaven.org/2012/09/temple-talk.html>

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