**19th July 2009**

**2 Samuel 7:1–16; Ephesians 2.11-22**

The Old Testament Theologian Walter Brueggemann considers this passage as containing the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament in the unconditional promise that God makes to David.

As well as promises and covenant and what that means in terms of prophecy and privilege, the questions about God’s election and choosing , who God decided to bless and prosper, this passage is also about homes. Where is God at home? Where do we know the presence of God? Can God be contained in a building?

“Make yourself at home.” We often say – and then maybe regret it when people take advantage of our hospitality!

“This place just doesn’t feel like home yet”: Is another expression that suggests we are not yet comfortable in a new place.

“Your home is your castle.” A phrase which suggests that you have some where to retreat too and relax and be yourself, pull up the drawbridge, man the sentry towers and keep everyone out and at a distance.

*Home* forms a powerful metaphor for adult life, far beyond the sense of a physical dwelling place. Through careers, relationships, recreation, and serving, adults strive to fashion a home – a place – in their world.

If we are fortunate to own our own home, the day when the mortgage is paid off is a day of freedom and liberation. This is ours now. Until that day there is always an insecurity and a fear that your home may be taken away from you.

The British obsession with homes fuels our economy and our feelings of prosperity, do we feel wealthy or do we feel poor and overstretched? The mood music is vital for politics and will be a key factor in the coming General election. Do we feel better off and secure in our own homes?

Young adults may be busily immersed in that building. Older adults may be immersed in reflecting on what has been achieved or lost over the years. We respond differently to the notion of “home”. We can all reflect on the places that have been important in our lives. What made you feel at home or not in each one?

There is a sense in which the making of a place that “feels like home” attempts to organize and control the varied elements of our lives and to help us cope with life and the anxieties of life. But we should all know that life does not always conform to our attempts at control.

Our focus scripture narrates God’s “no” to David’s plans. “No” cannot be an easy word for the prophet Nathan to speak, nor for David to hear.

“No” can be a difficult word for us to accept as well. The good news in this story, and in our lives, is that even when we encounter “no” to plans or hopes that we thought reasonable or

even faithful, God’s love remains and God gives us an even bigger ‘yes’ instead.

If you recall the biblical passage from last week, 2 Samuel 6 King David has established Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, and has moved the ark of the covenant to this place.

As the story of David continues, we encounter a picture of the Israelites settling into Jerusalem, making it their permanent home. David desires for God to do the same.

David has built a “house of cedar” for his dwelling, yet “the ark of God remains in a tent.” David plans to build a grand temple to house the ark – to be God’s permanent dwelling among them. *Bayith,* the Hebrew word for “house,” occurs

seven times in this passage. *Bayith* also may be understood as “palace,” “temple,” or “dynasty.” These wider meanings enrich the significance of “house” in this passage.

The prophet Nathan is first mentioned in the saga of David in this passage. Nathan first approves David’s plan, but then receives word from God to say “no” to David’s proposed temple to “house” God. This will not be the last time that Nathan speaks to limit David’s royal power as we will discover in a couple of weeks’ time after David commits adultery.

Here that challenge is not attributed to any fault in David. Rather, the principle at stake involves God’s freedom. The decision against a temple centres on God’s history of moving freely among and on behalf of God’s people. God will not be confined to any location. The true home of the people is in God’s presence, wherever God is, not vice versa.

I wish I had a pound for every time someone has said to me ‘I don’t need to go to church – I can worship God in my own living room, or out walking in the countryside. I feel closer to god on top of a hill than I do in a church building’ Why bother having church buildings. We ask ourselves that every time we throw thousands of more pounds at patching ours up or more positively adapting it for the needs of the 21st century.

When I was in Africa I was due to preach at a church out in the middle of the bush. I arrived at the settlement and wondered where the church was. I asked a woman and she pointed to the tree. The church met under the shade of the tree. Oh for a warm dry climate!

There is a story about the Maasai people, who live in both Kenya and the neighbouring country of Tanzania. The Maasai people are nomadic – that is, they travel from place to place, settling in one location temporarily before it is time to move on. When they move, they take with them only one thing: their cows, which are considered sacred.

One day, some Christian missionaries from Europe decided that the Maasai people needed to hear the gospel. And so, the missionaries came to the land of the Maasai and did what they traditionally did: they built a church. They told the Maasai that the church building was an important place to come and worship God.

The Maasai people were excited, and they came to church. They worshipped and celebrated and knew God. But, when it was time for the nomadic Maasai to leave this location, they left this place of worship behind and wandered into the desert to find a new place to call home.

The missionaries searched until they found the same group of Maasai people again, living in a new place. The relieved missionaries build a new church there and invited the Maasai to come. For a time, the Maasai people came and worshipped and celebrated and knew God.

But, one day, the Maasai left their new place of worship and wandered into the desert again to find a new home.

The missionaries looked around again until they found the new location where the Maasai were not living. And, for the first time, they asked the Maasai why they kept leaving the church house. Wasn’t God’s house important to them? Didn’t they respect the church? And, for the first time, the Maasai responded.

They said they loved God and they were excited about God’s promises. But, they said, they didn’t need a structure in order to worship God. They would always move from place to place. Buildings have never been important to them. What is important, the Maasai explained, is that they carry God with them in their hearts. And so God’s place is always with them. Then, the Maasai asked the missionaries, “If God is always with you, why is a church building so important?”

It is a good question to ask!

Our climate, of course, makes a building to meet in essential. In our tradition we have called churches ‘meeting places’ where we can meet with one another and meet with God. Our buildings have traditionally been more functional than say an Anglican church which is consecrated – a sacred place where a bit of heaven touches earth. Our tradition, shaped by the Reformers, such as Calvin, decided too many statues and stained glass windows and elaborate furnishings would distract people form the Word of God and ran the risk of becoming idols – representations of the divine that people gave their devotion to , rather than seeing them as a vehicle to worship God. .For the Reformers, churches were just somewhere to meet.

I think they went too far and threw the baby out with the bath water. Anyone who organises meetings or has any interest in the importance of presentation – from a shop window to a hotel room - will know the importance of creating the right environment that is conducive for a good meeting to take place. We are affected by our environment and the aesthetics – we are human. We all know what ‘feels like home’.

We also need structure and discipline. Coming to a fixed place at a fixed time is helpful for many people to focus and reflect. For those who say they don’t need to come to church to worship God the question can be put back to them: when therefore do you actually worship God and consciously come into his presence and hear his word. The fact that we do this together hopefully prevents us from self-delusion.

The converse is also true. People can come to church and think they have done their God bit for the week. They can leave God and God’s claims on their lives behind the shut door of a church building, returning to the ‘real world’ for the other six and a half days of the week and live totally differently.

There are truths on all sides of this debate and they need to be held in tension with each other.

God has accommodated himself to human needs. The ark of the covenant, was held in the Tent of meeting – the Tabernacle – in Moses day. The temple in Jerusalem would eventually be built by David’s son Solomon. Solomon’s temple would be destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC, rebuilt fifty years later and reconstructed five centuries later by Herod the Great. The Romans would destroy it in 70AD and present day orthodox Jews dream of building a third temple to welcome the coming Messiah. The trouble is that the Islamic shrine, the Dome of the Rock is on the spot, encompassed in the Al Asqa mosque. That’s the problem with buildings – opposing groups of people feel they own them! No wonder God didn’t want to confine himself to one.

Instead, in this passage God is concerned with a different kind of house – the house of all humanity, the people of God. The promise of a Davidic line established “forever” (verses 14, 16) marks a dramatic shift in God’s covenant history. As I have said at the start, Walter Brueggemann considers this passage to contain the most crucial theological statement in the Old Testament.

The covenant struck on Sinai (see Exodus, chapters 19–24) insisted on conditions for Israel. Disobedience was threatened with judgment. **If** you do this then I will be your god. If you don’t do this then you break the covenant. In verse 15 God says ‘but my love will never be withdrawn – your family and your kingdom will be established forever’. “Forever” asserts the unconditional nature of God’s promise to David. It’s like a blank cheque.

Those two understandings of covenant remain in creative tension throughout the biblical witness. God’s word at Sinai cautions against those who presume God to be “on our side” no matter what.

God’s word to David insists that one’s standing before God relies on God’s gracious choices.

Our life and history teaches us about the reality of judgement and condition, so that we only know about the ‘if’ of reality from our own experience. If we do this – or don’t do that – then this happens…

The other side of the tension is God’s unconditional commitment. The ‘but’ and the ‘forever’: ‘**but** my love will never be withdrawn- your family and kingdom will be established **foreve**r’.

God’s conditional requirements and God’s unconditional promises belong to biblical faith. Both belong to God’s character and both are crucial to our human life, our life with God and with each other.

This prophecy is the root of our evangelical faith: a faith that relies on the free promise of the gospel. It is the gospel of grace: justified by grace not by works. Made right with God because God loves us unconditionally – we don’t earn that love and acceptance by our works, by the ‘if’s’ of life: if we keep the commands, if we come to church, if we are nice people and do good things: if we do all that then God will love us and let us be part of his kingdom. There is no if – ‘But my love will never be withdrawn’. We are saved by grace through faith.

David is not the only recipient of promise in this text. God’s vision includes the community of Israel but is not limited to a promise for David and the ensuing royal line; it makes room for the entire people of God.

Wherever God is, human-made boundaries are broken. **Ephesians 2:11–22** affirms God’s expanding of the Christian community to make room for Gentiles. Paul locates this reconciliation between Jew and Gentile in the symbol of the cross. Jesus, the Son of David, the Word of God who made his home among us, the presence of God in human flesh and history, is the bringer of grace and the head of God’s household – a mansion where there are many rooms.

Of course this promise to David and his house has been used to justify the State of Israel, The cynic would say that is was written up in the Bible by those loyal to the house of David to justify his succession to the throne of Israel – it is therefore self-serving prophecy.

There was a young person who was desperately trying to discern God’s call on his life. He felt the Lord was asking him to be a missionary and he wanted to have a sign. As he made his prayer a friend came in and said they had a special gift for him: a bar of chocolate. The chocolate had brazil nuts in it and the young man immediately took this to be a sign that God was calling him to be a missionary in Brazil. His friend immediately poured cold water on this by saying that he nearly gave him a Mars bar – what would he have done then?

All prophecies and words need good honest discernment, and the church is useful for that to give us that breadth of experience and wisdom to help us in that discernment process – we need our Nathan’s. Maybe you are trying to sense God’s call to you, God’s purpose for you at this moment in time – be open to how God may guide through his word, but also through common sense, the conviction of the Spirit, circumstantial signs and the counsel of the saints.

This passage is also the tap root of a messianic idea and hope that God would send a messiah in the future to restore fortunes and right wrongs and establish good governance. For Christians that points to Jesus his first coming and the expectation of his second coming. For Jews, they still long for a messianic hope. Either way, we hope for God to act in history, righting the world.

There is therefore no escape that whilst this ideological statement speaks of grace and God’s election and purposes it can also be self-serving to political leaders and groups who use it to justify their own position. The combination of faith and self - interest always keeps faith close to the realities of public life. You can’t have pure religion, pure faith. It is always contaminated by the world in which that faith is being expressed and addressed. There are always vested interests, there will always be differences of opinion and interpretation. That is the inescapable character of real biblical faith. We cannot escape the world in which we find ourselves. But we can be as honest and searching of ourselves in that process and work out our faith in fear and trembling.

But we do that with God’s unconditional promise to us, to be with us as we do that, to always love us forever. Even when we get ‘no’s’ in our lives, even when we may not feel at home and feel lost, we have God’s ‘yes’ to us to offer us that security; we have God’s presence with us to offer us our real and eternal home.

May we find ourselves at home in the company of Christ and the household of God – wherever that may be – and may we

invite others to come home to God.