

Where does God dwell?

Sunday 19 July, 2015

A sermon preached by the Canon Pastor, the Revd Dr Ruth Redpath.

We are often told by those learning English that they are readily confused, by the inconsistencies in our pronunciation of the same combination of letters, or that several words - pronounced identically - are spelt differently and with quite different meanings from each other. We all know too that a single English word can, in different contexts, be used in quite different senses.

One such word is house. Most commonly - this is the building in which we live. A church building is sometimes referred to as God's house.

At school many will have experienced the house system, the basis for competition in sports and other activities, with no actual building attached.

Occasionally, we use the word house when we are speaking of a family.

The different generations of the British royal family are often grouped together as members of the house of Windsor.

It is not only in English that the same word can have several different meanings. In our reading from the second book of Samuel, the same Hebrew word is translated "house" with at least 3 different connotations. It is as if the writer was playing on words, just as writers in English often do for literary effect.

For a start, we read of David, the king, "settled in his **house**" - **a beautiful cedar palace** - a picture of contentment and peace. Such comfort and rest was a new experience for David. He had lived through tempestuous times. As a young shepherd boy he had been anointed to be the future king, even though not part of the house of Saul, the reigning king of Israel. Following Saul's death, the transfer of power to David was anything but smooth. Members of Saul's family led rebellions and there was a period of unrest and guerrilla warfare.

Having largely subdued the resistance, and established Jerusalem as the capital of this newly united kingdom, and built his comfortable palace, David thought it was time for **God to have a House** to live in - **a temple**. Up till this time, just as the people had been living in tents so their worship was focused on the tabernacle or tent, a portable structure which contained the Ark of the Covenant. This was where they believed God dwelt. Wherever they went, the ark and the tent in which it was housed journeyed with them, assuring them of God's constant presence. Now David believed it was time to provide a focus for worship which was both beautiful and permanent.

At first, Nathan the prophet - whom he consulted - encouraged him in this plan,

But then, as we read, Nathan received a message from God. He needed to correct David's vision – God had not said this should happen; something of greater importance was in God's mind.

It is as if God is saying through Nathan, "Don't be concerned, David. I have everything in hand - I called you. I have been with you and I am giving you rest from all the past struggles. But I am not asking you to build a house for me. That can wait; it is not my priority for you right now."

So, Nathan goes on. "Actually, David, instead of **you building a house for God, the Lord** will make **YOU a house** - you will have a family, and the name of your family, your house, down through the generations, will be great. It will not be you, but your son, the next in line, who will build the temple."

This is a time of great significance. Politically and socially, David's reign has brought new stability in the land. In him (for all his failings) a leader of high calibre has arrived, after generations of unsatisfactory leadership. This is the moment for a **new** statement of the **old covenant** made with Abraham and with Moses that in the people of Israel all the nations of the earth would be blessed. God is establishing the Davidic dynasty, his house and his throne for ever in continuity with his past promises. In this declaration, David is assured that his people will continue to be part of the purposes of God.

When we turn to our reading from Ephesians, you may have noticed that the metaphors of buildings and houses and temples are again called into use. Prior to this, Paul has waxed eloquent - as he does so often in his letters - about the good news of the gospel of Christ.

What blessings they could experience because of Christ's coming!

What **would** life have been like for them, had they not come to know Jesus?

Indeed, they would not have been friends of God, they would have been outsiders, without the knowledge of their sins being forgiven.

God's plan, however, did not allow that things should be left like that; the gift of his grace in Jesus Christ - the culmination of the promises to David and his forbears - changed everything.

So Paul asks his readers to remember that.

The Ephesians receiving this letter were largely new Christians from a Gentile (non-Jewish) background. Though himself brought up as a Jew, he knew only too well the barriers which had existed between Jews and others.

Though many Gentile people had become adherents of the Jewish faith, they were not permitted to enter the inner court of the temple. Even though throughout Old Testament times there were exhortations to welcome strangers, and to be generous in hospitality to all, an overlay of restrictions had only served to increase the social and religious separation between them. This obviously was a significant issue in the early church when both Gentiles and Jews became Christian believers.

It is in this context that we have the language, of houses and temples.

Those divisions which they had experienced should no longer exist, Paul says, and speaks of a house with no dividing walls; they have been broken down by Jesus Christ.

He has made peace.

There need be separation no longer.

Faith in Jesus is now sufficient; no longer do Gentiles have to conform to Jewish requirements of circumcision and food laws and all the other prescribed practices.

Yes - they had been "strangers to the covenants of promise. The covenants made to Abraham and Moses and David were unfamiliar, not part of their background.

Yes, they had been far off, aliens.

But now they had been brought near. They had become part of a new house - one without partitions.

Then we find Paul describing not a building but a household - a group of people where all are equal. You, he says, are no longer confined to the veranda, to the outer courts; you are now full members of the household, sharing all the blessings of this new life along with everyone else.

Elsewhere - in his Galatian letter (3:28) - Paul says something very similar and even more explicitly. "There is no longer Jew or Greek, ... slave or free, ... male or female, for all of you are one in Christ Jesus. If you belong to Christ, then you are Abraham's offspring, (yes, you Gentiles too,) and are heirs according to the promise."

Gentiles were accepted fully, as much part of the family, as were the Jews; slaves were on equal terms with their master so far as their standing before Christ and in the church was concerned.

In the society of that day, this was a breath-taking description of the new kind of kingdom which Jesus came to bring.

But Paul takes us further, once more using the metaphor of an actual building. This house, he says, is made of many disparate pieces joined together into one indivisible frame. The foundation of this building has been laid by the apostles and prophets, with the cornerstone - the indispensable piece in this new and strangely beautiful structure - being Jesus Christ.

Everyone who is incorporated into this building, no matter what their origins, no matter what quarry the clay for the bricks came from, belongs not just to Jesus Christ but to one other, as all contribute to its integrity.

So the Ephesians are called to put aside the insecurity and tensions which such differences have provoked and stand together confidently, yet humbly and peaceably, feeling at home with each other, because they belong, and belong together, because of their common experience as recipients of the grace of salvation in Jesus Christ.

And what is this building to be? Here we have yet another breath-taking idea - this is to be a holy temple - a dwelling-place for God.

He is not here speaking of a literal building, but a spiritual one. It is among the people of God, organically joined to Jesus Christ and to each other as by the mortar in the bricks of a building, that God is pleased to dwell.

What does this all have to say to us today?

All of us who belong to Jesus Christ are no less members of the household of faith, beneficiaries of God's covenant of grace, the dwelling place of God himself, than were those Ephesian Christians. Within the church, we too are called to demonstrate, from hearts grateful for that privilege, the freedom from barriers that could divide us, the forgiving spirit which sets aside quibbles about secondary matters, and the love and compassion which fully accepts the misfit and the unattractive, and those from different backgrounds, as fellow members of the body of Christ, as fellow-citizens in his kingdom, as if members of the one family.

You must have noticed that in our society today, attitudes towards those of other backgrounds and races, those who are different, seem to have hardened in recent days. We humans have such a strong propensity for constructing walls and barriers, whether from fear or greed or desire to maintain power. Christians are not immune to such a denial of gospel truth.

How can we not, as Christian people who have been welcomed into the household of God, not hold the door open to welcome those who belong nowhere, and offer them the opportunity to find a new identity in the household of faith.

David had wanted to build a splendid temple to match his own palace and to signify the presence of God among his people. In the new kingdom of God's grace brought to us by great David's greater Son, it is not

primarily in buildings, but in the hearts and minds of people and communities that he seeks to dwell. May we ever - as individuals and in the church communities to which we belong - have large hearts both to receive him and to share his grace with others.

So we will then truly be able to say with the psalmist "I will dwell in the house of the Lord for ever."