

PENTECOST 13 YEAR B / 26TH AUGUST 2012 / EAGLEHAWK 10 AM

Years ago Jeannie and I had an architect design us a house. He specialized in designing mudbrick, energy-efficient homes and lived in a lovely mudbrick house up in the bush near Eltham. His name was Alastair Knox. He died a good many years back. One of the things Alastair said, almost as a mantra was this: "A house is merely a shelter from the elements and a place to sleep warm and dry at night. It is not meant to be a status symbol, simply a shelter." We never built that house because having had the plans drawn up I was called to Alice Springs where we lived for 7 years. The block at Raywood for which Alastair designed the home had to be sold because the neighbours were understandably anxious about the growth of grass on the block which became a fire hazard.

A house is nothing but a house unless it becomes a home; unless it has that feel of a safe place, a place of shelter and acceptance and warmth and love. There are thousands of houses in Bendigo but not all of them are homes. Domestic violence is rife even in our fair city. Go and talk to some of the workers at EASE or one of the places dealing with the results of violence in the "home". I heard an interview with a worker from an agency in the Mallee just this week. The interviewer was really surprised to hear that at the refuge in one place in the Mallee they receive a call once a night on average from someone seeking refuge from family violence.

Bricks and mortar on their own do nothing for the human spirit. But bricks and mortar which are places of love and acceptance and hope certainly do. I suppose that is why people have such a difficulty letting go of church buildings. It is not so much the bricks and mortar that goes deep. It is the experiences of love and forgiveness, of hope and joy of which the bricks and mortar have been an agent and a context.

Our first two readings, from Kings and the psalm, are both obviously related to the place of the Jewish temple in the life of the people. The record is ambiguous as to whether the temple was an idea which God approved or not. As I said last week, the idea came to King David after he had settled happily in his palace having established himself on his throne. And when he announces that he is going to build a temple, the prophet Nathan suggests that God certainly hasn't made the request for a house to live in.

Most religions seem to have developed the notion of a special building. There is a massive stupa being built out at Myers Flat as we speak. When I was a chaplain out at the university as part of my role at Neale Street we were asked to vacate the chaplaincy room we were in in order that a prayer space could be built for the growing number of Moslem students coming to LaTrobe. The reason they needed that space was because there were ablution facilities right next door and it is part of Moslem practice to wash before going to prayers. Nearly all faith expressions seem to require special buildings. The only faith expression I know of that doesn't have special buildings is Aboriginal spirituality. (There may be others, I don't know.) That lack of a sacred building may well have been a reflection of the fact that Aboriginal people didn't have permanent houses themselves. Mind you, they did have special places (called sacred sites) in the landscape in which the presence of the spirit was known to be particularly present. Interestingly, you won't find an Aboriginal community now without a church building. But of course, white missionaries would have brought that idea to the people.

So, what do you reckon, is God okay about this building we are in right now? How important is this building to God? They are the questions that are begged by these two passages from the Hebrew Scriptures this morning. And in a sense, they are never unequivocally answered. But let me ask you this: where did the effective ministry of Jesus take place? In a building? Jesus seemed to have a very fraught relationship with the religious buildings of his time and what went on there. Even his time in his home synagogue at Nazareth was not supportive. You may remember the story that after he had preached the locals wanted to chuck him off a cliff. So, it does make us sit back and ponder the place of buildings in the life of a people of faith and what

those buildings can do to a congregation and its focus. And his attitude to the temple and what went on there is well known.

The Kings passage relates to the moment in time when the Ark of the Covenant which had been resting in another part of Jerusalem called David's City was brought into the new temple that Solomon had had built. The bulk of our lectionary reading is a prayer, strangely enough said by Solomon, not by a priest. They must have been into lay ministry. In fact, this prayer is the longest prayer in the narrative of the whole Hebrew Scriptures. The psalms are not part of that narrative but were essentially the temple hymn book. We don't have the whole of the prayer in our reading thankfully: it runs from verse 23 to 53. The interesting bit of the prayer however is included and that is the part in which Solomon acknowledges the tension in the idea that God has a house to live in.

(read 1 Kings 8:27)

Solomon seems to be aware of the danger that is located in locating God. It's as if he is saying "God cannot be located because God is the location." Put another way: "This building is in God: God is not in this building." And if you bring that down to a personal level it would be to say: "God is not in us: we are in God".

While our spiritual experience is always personal and local, we cannot confuse our experiences and rituals with the totality of God. Those horrible days when even within the Christian tradition we seemed to worship entirely local Gods were expressions of just that propensity: of confusing our experiences and rituals with God. Gods which are limited by geography and history are gods who demand exclusionary ethics (making that god's worshippers better than others); such gods deny hospitality to strangers and those who fall outside the practices and beliefs of its adherents.

Scholars believe that this book and a good many others found their final form during the time of the exile in Babylon. It is fascinating then to notice that as part of this prayer there is this delightful openness towards someone of a different tradition and background.

(read v. 41-43b)

In other words, the experience of the Jewish people in exile – far from their homeland and their religious symbols and customs – that experience helped them come to understand things in a much wider perspective than once they had. Standing where the other has stood is by far the best way to develop an understanding and a sympathy for the other.

There is another version of that show on SBS "Back to where you came from" this week. It is something like a reality TV show in which people are put through the experiences of some of the boat people refugees, making their way to our shores in leaky boats. One of the participants in this series is the ex-politician, Peter Reith, who was the minister informing the then Prime Minister during the Tampa affair. Unfortunately Jeannie and I will be somewhere north of here in our caravan going through TV withdrawal symptoms as our caravan is a TV free zone.

God is always more than we can imagine; God's grace and welcome is always larger than humans can conceive. We will know that grace best when we are open to knowing and accepting those who worship God in different forms and through different pathways and with different histories.

The lectionary psalm was most likely used as a pilgrimage song for people who traveled to the festivals in Jerusalem. We've got it easy: not many of us have had to travel any great distance to get here today. Nor were we in any danger in doing so. Not so the pilgrims who made their way from all over the holy land to get to the festivals in Jerusalem. Listen to the sense of anticipation expressed at the outset of the psalm.

(read Psalm 84:1-2)

Anyone here come longing and fainting for the courts of the Lord this morning? Anyone's heart and flesh singing for joy to the living God as they drove or walked to church today? Any sense of anticipation as you made your way here? Makes me wonder if we gather too often. Our gatherings are a bit too frequent to deliver that sense of eager anticipation. I don't know. Maybe people going along to more charismatic and exuberant fellowships may sense something of what the psalmist is in touch with here. I've sometimes pondered the weekly routine we have though

and wondered whether it would be better for us to meet in home groups in which we share our faith stories and pray and even eat together say once a week. Then we could come together for a monthly celebration event of what has been happening in those smaller groups.

I reckon that this psalm was written sometime down the track of the temple's life: long enough for the birds to have made it their home. Listen to verse 3.

(read v.3)

Isn't that a delightful touch? In our experience, cathedrals and church buildings are often infested (some would say) with birds, and even with bats. The psalmist is almost envious of the swallows and sparrows whose lives are lived out in the temple and around the altar: that is their home; they never have to leave.

(read v.4)

I can't say that living and sleeping here in this place is all that appealing to me, but the psalm is poetry and as someone has written "the psalms are the emotional voice of the scripture". Just like any good poetry is doing: it is going deeper than mere intellect into the centre of our being where our emotions lie. And of course, our emotions can unlock us in ways that our brains never could.

I was sent one of those internet circulating DVD clips the other day: it was a scene in a piazza (an open square) in a city in Italy. It begins with this lone cellist playing strains from Beethoven's Ninth Symphony. People are looking at the cellist strangely wondering what she is up to. Then she is joined by a few violins who also take up the strains of the symphony. Then more and more instruments appear and swell the sound – by which time the whole square is taking notice and not looking strangely any more. Then a choir appears and takes up that powerful choral part of Beethoven's Ninth (which we have in Together in Song as "Ode to Joy"). And the camera pans around the square at people and children just enchanted: children conducting the music, people moving in time. By which time I am sobbing my eyes out. When I pondered my surprising reaction – and I was surprised because I had heard that symphony many times – I realized that for the first time in my life I had been truly touched by that music in the way in which Beethoven meant us to be moved. It got past my analytical mind and found its way into the seat of my emotions and I had this deep sense that life is good and pure and loving and that that is the way God meant it to be.

You see dear friends, I think the whole emphasis on correct theological thinking which has dominated the church's life down the centuries.. and let's face it, the church has not only persecuted people for not believing the "right" things but had them put to death.. I think that emphasis has bred a deformed and distorted human spirit which is devoid of emotion and feeling. The feeling coming through both our Hebrew Scripture passages this morning reaches beyond right theology to that sense of emotion. There are plenty of Christians around who have very neat theology but whose spirits are shriveled and emotionless. God save us from that.

Let me finally make a couple of comments about the Ephesians passage.

First, notice that the armour here is almost completely defensive not offensive.

(read Ephesians 6:11)

Not that you will be able to wage war you notice, but stand. The only offensive piece of armour mentioned is the "sword of the Spirit which is the word of God". And even the word will never slay temptation but it sure wards it off.

When I went forward at the Brian Willersdorf Crusade at the Capital Theatre in 1966 a lovely man Mr. Grierson gave me some cards with bible verses on. And one was such a help in the days ahead. 1 Corinthians 10:13...anyone know it? In the King James it runs: "There hath no temptation taken you but such as is common to man: but God is faithful who will not suffer you to be tempted above that ye are able; but will with the temptation also make a way to escape that you may be able to bear it." I don't know how many times in my early Christian experience I found myself quoting that verse to myself in situations I faced.

Secondly, we need to ask, against what or who are we defending ourselves.

(read v.12)

An irony lurks just below the surface here. Think of what our arsenal is: truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, the Word. And with these we are to defend ourselves against "rulers, authorities, cosmic powers, spiritual forces"!

It is striking how many names the New Testament writers invent to designate these ambiguous entities. They may be called powers "of this world," then on the other hand "celestial powers." They are also called names like "sovereignties", "thrones", "dominions", "princes of the kingdom of the air", "elements of the world", "archons", "kings", "princes of this world" and the list goes on. Why such a vast vocabulary, made up apparently of such dissimilar elements? Whether these forces are worldly or celestial is never clear.

Walter Wink, in his book "Naming the Powers" describes these powers thus: "They are the legitimations, the seats of authority, the hierarchical systems, the ideological justifications, and punitive sanctions which their human incumbents exercise and which transcend these incumbents in both time and power. It is the suprahuman dimension of power in institutions and the cosmos which must be fought, not the mere human agent. For the institution will guarantee the replacement of this person with another virtually the same, who despite personal preferences will replicate decisions made by a whole string of predecessors because that is what the institution requires for its survival. It is this suprahuman quality which accounts for the apparent "heavenly," bigger than life, quasi-eternal character of the Powers."

You only need to study church history to know that that is absolutely true. Indeed, you only need to observe how churches cover up the dreadful deeds of some of their number to know that human institutions – and the institutional church is just one such, nothing more – have the capacity to be fearful instruments of evil in our world. And truth, righteousness, peace, faith, salvation, the Spirit, and the Word are the things which will not only defend us from such humanly destructive agencies, but will allow us to see them for what they are.