

The House of God
(2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Psalm 89:20-37; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56)

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Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

[The Gospel for this week begins where last week's Gospel left off. The 12 apostles, having been sent out and done great deeds in Jesus' name, have been observed by Herod, who sees in their great works the marks of the work not only of the miracles of Jesus but also of the teaching of John the Baptizer whom Herod had killed. And now having completed their mission these 12 have returned to Jesus.]

Those who had been sent out by Jesus now returned and were all gathering around him. They started to tell him about all the things that they had done and the things that they had taught. Jesus then said to them: 'Come, let us go to be alone for a little while in a deserted place'. He said this because so many were coming and going that they couldn't even grab a bite to eat. And yet even when he was leaving with them, he saw a great crowd and had compassion on the crowd because they were like sheep without a shepherd. And so he stopped and began to teach many things.

When they were finally able to cross the lake, they came to Gennesaret. There they tied up their boat. But, as soon as they got out of the boat, the people living there immediately recognized him. They ran through the whole region and found those who were sick and began to carry them to him on mats. They did so wherever they heard that he was. Wherever he went, whether into villages or cities or fields, they laid before him in the open markets those who were sick and they begged him that he might let the sick just touch the hem of his garment. And when they did, as many as touched it were set free.

It is possible to summarize the history of Israel in the following way:

An insignificant nomadic people was chosen by God and gifted by God with powers beyond their wildest dreams. God had chosen them, rather than their powerful neighbours, so that people who lived around them might see that their power came not from them but from God. They were chosen by God for a clear purpose: to go into the whole world and be God's means of blessing the whole earth by reconciling it to Himself. But, this people took these powers, this great gift of being chosen by God, and kept it to themselves, turning it to their own use in order to make themselves great in the world.

Remember the story. God had found Abraham and, in spite of Abraham's cowardice, had led him out of his own country toward a new land. God had found Jacob, Abraham's grandson, and,

in spite of Jacob's malicious personality, had given him 12 sons to populate that land. God had found Moses, and, in spite of Moses's inadequate leadership qualities, had equipped him to lead the people out of slavery in Egypt and back into the land of Israel.

But, once Israel found itself in the land that God had promised to them, and they had defeated many of their enemies, they forgot about God. Instead, they looked around and said: 'Everyone else has a king; we need a king. We can't just keep trusting God to raise up leaders when we need them. We want to be like the other nations, but better than them.' And so they chose Saul, who fit the role of a Middle Eastern king, even down to our day. And then when Saul wasn't powerful enough to defeat his enemies, the people changed their minds and decided that Saul wasn't going to lead them into glory, so they chose David.

David started off well, as long as he had enemies. But, once David had become king, and God had defeated his enemies, David, too, forgot how God had provided for him. Instead, of trusting God to make His power known to the surrounding peoples, David decided to take matters into his own hands. He looked around and saw the great temples of Assyria, of Babylon, of Egypt. Then he looked at Israel's poor nomad's tent, the Tabernacle, the place where God had said that he would meet with His people. The tent was the place that God had set aside as a reminder that God was the one who was leading the people and that God was the one who would be their king. But David said: 'A tent? That's so embarrassing for a great people. Surely we can do better than that. Our God needs a real house, like that of the Assyrian gods, the Babylonian gods, and the Egyptian gods, and maybe even better than theirs.'

Right. God, who created the heavens and the earth, needs a place on earth to lay his sleepy head, as if that's what the tent had been. But, even the tent wasn't intended to be God's bedroom. The tent was a fearsome place, intended to be a reminder, as Pastor Paul reminded us last week, that God's presence was so powerful that you shouldn't even come close to it unless God asks you to do so. No, the tent was more like a veil around something that was mysterious and dangerous, something that you shouldn't get too close to. And so God says to David through the prophet Nathan: 'No. You will NOT build me a house. I will build YOU a house and give you an heir.'

In the end, a Temple was built by that heir, David's son, Solomon. As long as Israel was God's means of bringing blessing to the world, that Temple was pregnant with possibility for what it could be if Israel did what it was called to do. In the best of times, with Nehemiah and Ezra, the Temple truly became what it could be: a place where the people could hear God speak to them about what they were supposed to do. But those "best of times" were very short-lived because again and again the people used the Temple not for the glory of God but as a demonstration of their own glory.

That happened most clearly when the Temple was expanded under King Herod the Great, another typical Middle Eastern tyrant with an ingenious architectural streak. He expanded the Temple, which went from being a little building not much larger than the little house that my wife and I live in in Nepean, to being a massive structure the size of 4 football fields. Not surprisingly, the people thought indeed that NOW FINALLY they would be seen to be great in the eyes of the world. Now, THIS will be something to celebrate, a tourist site even for visitors from Greece and Rome. Even Jesus' Galilean followers said to him: "'Wow, Teacher, what

wonderful stones and what wonderful buildings!" (Mark 13:1). This is truly the house of God. Aren't we something?

But what did Jesus call the Temple? 'This is not the house of God; this is a den of thieves.' Intended as a house of prayer to God, a house that would draw the nations, the Temple had become a money-pit through which the priesthood and their supporters were getting richer and richer at the expense of God's people. And what did Jesus say to his 12 followers would happen to it as a result? When the Son of Man comes, this Temple will be torn down stone by stone, burned with fire. And so it happened, just 40 years later when the Roman armies of Vespasian stormed through the city, and demolished the Temple. They left only one of the foundation walls, the western one, a reminder of the glory that Israel once hoped for before the nations.

Jesus was indeed a prophet. He proclaimed the end of a Temple that had begun as David's hope of showing the glory of the people of Israel and that had become the home of the Jewish religious cartel. Only rarely had it been the house of God.

But, Jesus was much more than a prophet. Jesus did not simply find fault and promise destruction. Because of who He is, He actually brought into our midst the true house of God. Because this Jesus was not only a man; he was the Word of God made flesh, the Lord of the Temple come to the Temple BOTH to cast judgment on this Temple made with human hands AND to proclaim that HE was the true temple, the one who himself tented among us and showed us God in the only way that God has chosen to make himself known in flesh.

It was Jesus who, in the Temple, had said: 'You scribes talk of this building as the house of God. But I tell you: look at me. I am the true house of God. Here is where God dwells. Even if you destroy THIS temple, in 3 days I will raise it up again.' The authorities of the Temple in Jerusalem mocked him, thought him insane. But his disciples realized later, after he had been executed with the explicit permission of the Temple priests but then raised from the dead by God, that Jesus had been telling the truth: HIS body WAS the true house of God. It was in him, in Jesus, that God had taken up residence and become flesh.

When they looked back on their time with him, the 12 apostles began to realize that whenever they had been with Jesus, they had been in the presence of God. It was God who had given them power. It was God who had brought healing to the crowds on Jewish shores of Galilee and the same liberating healing to the Gentile crowds on the shores of Gennesaret. They realized that merely touching the hem of this High Priest's garment brought not merely a diagnosis for sickness but the healing itself. And yet there was no Temple for hundreds of miles. And so it was that they began to realize that wherever Jesus was God was: whether it was in the city, in the village, or on the road. It was His presence that mattered, not WHERE he was. He was the true house of God.

And then they realized something even more shocking. It dawned on them that if he was STILL with them by His Spirit, and they knew that He was by what was happening in their midst, then THEY themselves had become what the Tabernacle had once been, what the Temple had once been at its best, and what Jesus himself had been during his earthly ministry, the place where God dwelt, the "house of God".

Of all his disciples, perhaps the apostle Paul understood best what Jesus meant when he described that all those who in baptism had died with Christ and who had been raised with him to new life in the Spirit had become “the body of Christ”. As Paul described it: YOU have become the new Temple, the house of God. YOU who have shared with Jesus in his very real death and who have now been raised with him into his very real new, risen life... YOU are the “body of Christ”, the very house of God, You, the Body of Christ, are the temple of God’s own Spirit. YOU are a dwelling place for God.

And as a reminder of how it is possible that we who have died with him and been raised with him are this body, as a reminder of how much it cost to bring both believing Jews and non-Jews together to become that one house, the early church, following Paul’s lead, made Jesus’ last supper the constant reminder whenever we meet together: We are who we are, the body of Christ, the house of God, because of Jesus’ sacrifice of his body for us... so take and eat, this is the body of Christ given for you the Body of Christ.

My friends, God did not tell David to build him a house. Nor did Jesus say to his followers: Build me a house. The Lord said to David and Jesus says to his followers: I will build the house and I will build it out of people like you.

My friends, you ARE that house. YOU are the place set aside from the beginning of the world to make God known. YOU are the place in which people are to experience the wonder, and the terror, and the beauty and the goodness of the Lord. YOU are the body of Christ: the price to purchase this house was a terrible price, but it has been paid and no one can undo that.

And YOU, as the house of God, have been given a mission. It is the same mission that God had originally given to Israel. God did not ask Israel to build him a temple and He does not ask us to build Him churches. But, if we do build Him churches, here is what they are to be used for. It was best said by the former bishop of the Diocese of Albany, Dan Herzog, who described the parishes in his Diocese as “mission outposts”. If we build churches, then let them be the places to which the people of God, the true house of God, come to be prepared and equipped to do what God has always called his people to do, from the time of the calling of Israel until today, to be sent out into the world to be a blessing to the world by reconciling it to God.

Many in ANiC do not have buildings. They are blessed. We do have a building. Our temptation will be to make it great in the eyes of the world. But if this parish keeps God’s original calling in mind, then we will avoid Israel’s sin of trying to be great in the eyes of the world. Instead we will be a “mission outpost” of the Kingdom, with our task to be God’s blessing to our world in our day. And if we want to expend our energy on anything IN this building, this is what we should be doing: equipping our people to be that mission people of God ... to the glory of our God. For that’s why He has called us and made us into His house.

And now to the only God, our Savior, through Jesus Christ our Lord, be glory, majesty, dominion, and authority, before all time and now and for ever. Amen.