

# Houses of Prayer

2 Samuel 7: 18 - 29

Luke 19: 41 - 20: 8

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Cathedral worship at Christ's College Chapel



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I am alternately amused and annoyed by those who are not Anglicans, and in many cases not even members of a Christian church at all – one of them describes himself as a Christian atheist, whatever that is – those who take it upon themselves to tell the Anglican Church what it should build or re-build in Cathedral Square. That's the penalty we pay for owning the prime site in the city and having had there a building that was and perhaps remains an icon of the city, even for those for whom it was not a spiritual home.

It's a subject that is very much in the air, and in the letters to the editor of The Press. The bottom line is that the land is owned by the church and in the end we have the right to say to those offering us advice: Thank you, but this is our own place and we will build what we think ought to be built here. We will try to see that it is a fitting building for the city, but its primary purpose is for the Anglican community of faith.

I wouldn't want to say much more than that, but then I was given the assigned readings for tonight. I'm faced with King David musing about his role in house building, and Jesus weeping over a city soon to be destroyed that does not know the things that make for peace and reminding his hearers that the temple was to be a house of prayer. Part of me at this point has a great liking for waxing lyrical about some obscure passage in Leviticus.

Nevertheless, there are some important insights in both our Old Testament and New Testament readings that can help us as we reflect deeply on just what we should build in the Square in due course.

In the Old Testament reading we have only the second half of the story. In the first half, David, having built a palace for himself and brought peace and stability to the nation of Israel, turns his thoughts to building an appropriate temple for the worship of Israel's God. After initially encouraging him to proceed, Nathan tells David that God does not want him to build a temple. As Nathan puts it, God had not had a grand temple so far in the journey of the Israelites out of Egypt to Canaan, so why should such a thing be needed now. The whole story hinges on various meanings of "house": David's palace, the house of God, David's family as his existing house and finally the house as his dynasty of descendants after him

As the section we heard read makes clear, the prime interest is in the house of David as a secure dynasty. The importance of this is that such things guaranteed Israel's security and prosperity: there was a solid core to the nation so that justice could be done, people looked after, government administered wisely and so on. In contemporary terms it puts the focus on our city council and groups like CERA. That is not to say that God and the worship of God are not important in Israel, but a blunt reminder that God is a God of the journey we must make as a people – the one who travels with us in a tent and ready to move on.

In our present context, the phrase in the New Testament reading that cries out for comment is Jesus' statement, "My house shall be a house of prayer, but you have made it

a den of robbers.” In the recent offers of advice on what Anglicans should do in the square, the first part of this has been loosely quoted or vaguely hinted at. One suggestion was for a multi-faith building with “stalls” inside for a whole variety of religious expressions. I fear our Dean may have unwittingly helped this picture by talking of the cathedral as a place for people of all faiths and none. All too easily that idea can sound like a kind of religious smorgasbord where you can hunt for your flavour of spirituality. I know that is not what the Dean means, but the idea of the cathedral as a kind of universal point of reference for religion has been aired.

As a complete aside, I note that no such suggestion has been made in respect of the Roman Catholic cathedral or Knox Church. Perhaps we could suggest it to the Moslem community for their mosque in Deans Avenue or to the Buddhists in Riccarton Road. Interestingly those last two help focus the issue. We wouldn't dream of saying that to either the Moslems or the Buddhists because we respect their integrity and identity. I'll come back to that point.

What are we to make Jesus' words? First, the setting in which Jesus said this. Luke, along with Matthew and Mark reaches a climax in telling the story of what God is up to in Jesus with Jesus' entry to Jerusalem. A key element of that was the cleansing of the temple. The first part of what Jesus says comes from Isaiah (my house shall be a house of prayer for all nations) and the second part from Jeremiah (but you have made it den of robbers). Here it is clearly a critique of what the temple is doing. Jesus' criticism is about the failure of the temple authorities to understand the grace of God. The deepest themes of Jesus' ministry had been about the embrace of God for all who wish to be part of his family – it was not determined by temple rites and rules. So Jesus challenges the temple to be what it was meant to be in the purposes of God. It will lead to his arrest and execution.

The purposes of God according to Jesus – and beautifully understood and written of by Paul – were to fashion a new humanity of the Spirit. We live in a very individualistic age, where the focus is on me, my rights, even my spirituality. There is nothing strange in such an approach to thinking of the cathedral as a place to which I, and anyone else, might go to get some spiritual nourishment. Fine, but that is not the good news of God in Christ. Nor is it, I might add, good news for the world. That approach suggests that how we should interpret “a house of prayer for all nations” is that we come and are accepted on our terms – whatever we want spiritually should be available there. But the world's problems are not about our individuality, but about us in relationship. We have to live together in community, and unless we truly learn to live together we will all perish together.

We all too easily misunderstand community. Real community does not come about because I make a decision to be in relationship with you as though it is all my choice. Rather it happens when you and I both discover together that we are bound by a common spirit that is not of either of our making. It is in that common spirit that I truly know who I am. So, when I come as I am because the invitation is open to all without discrimination, the next question is whether I am willing to recognise the spirit that makes the community what it is – in the church, that is the spirit of Christ – God's Holy Spirit.

We often talk about the fellowship of the Holy Spirit – and probably think of that as the fellowship that each of us who has the Spirit enjoys. In fact the fellowship is what the Spirit creates and we need to recognise it and accept each other as brothers and sisters if we are to be part of this. This is far removed from some search for an individually satisfying spirituality. There is a price to be paid for participating in this community. The door is always open, but staying depends on being in communion with these others and respecting the integrity and identity of the community of which I have become part.

As with individuals, communities can become very precious about their identity and integrity and some of the church's history would make you squirm with its intransigence and bigotry. Integrity and identity do not negate an open welcome. Openness and integrity are two different things and must not be confused. Openness is that rich sense that I am on a journey of life that is not yet over and I welcome all fellow travellers who may walk and talk with me about the journey. Without that openness, no conversation is ever possible. Integrity is about valuing the traditions and disciplines that have shaped me and enabled me to make the journey so far – I should not pretend to be other than I am. And religion comes from the Latin which means to bind (as in ligament, ligature) – the spiritual discipline that nurtures me. Two little stories illustrate this.

The first concerns a habit in some church circles these days almost to apologise for being Christian let alone Anglican. An Anglican Church was invited to offer a multi-faith service as it had one every year on Commonwealth Sunday. The vicar's warden begged the vicar as he did every year to leave out the Trinitarian blessing so as not to cause offence to the other faiths. It was a Hindu woman who defended the church's right to do Christian things in a Christian setting. As she said, "We know what we are coming to and we expect you to honour your own tradition."

The other story is a personal one. Bee and I have been invited to a wedding later this year. The couple are Indian and the ceremony will follow the Sikh tradition. We asked about appropriate protocols in a Sikh temple. The note we got back says that The Sikh Gurdwara, the home of the Sri Guru Granth Sahib (the Sikh Holy Book), welcomes people of all religious backgrounds. But they go on to state some expectations of dress and conduct which we will have to respect.

The Christian community is nourished in its sense of community by two key things – by hearing over and over again the story that makes us who we are as the people of God in Christ, the community of the Spirit, and by the regular enactment of the sacrament of our unity in which we do that most intimate thing of being in community – we break bread together. These are priceless gifts of our identity.

That is what we need to do in the square. Without that solid core we are nothing, just a worthless bit of woolly spirituality with no real substance or engagement with each other and useless to the world as well. So, we should unapologetically do Anglican things in the square. Of course the door will be open, but as an invitation to see how we are being shaped as the new humanity by our tradition of story and table fellowship in Christ.