

20 December 2020

2 Samuel 7:1-16

Romans 16:25-27

Luke 1:26-38

From time to time in our relationship Christine will exclaim, in exasperation (and with some justification, I might add), “Oh, you’re so predictable!” To which I will usually reply, “I like to think of it as *dependable*.” It is a discussion that is probably quite revealing about our characters in several ways!

When, quite a few years ago now, I did my introductory paper in Theology, the textbook was by Hendrikus Berkhof. In his discussion of the attributes of God, Berkhof pairs up terms that may be thought of as contradictory to try to bring a biblical balance to attributes that seem to owe rather too much to Greek philosophy. One of those pairs, which has stuck with me ever since, is “changeable faithfulness”.¹ Berkhof is reacting against a tendency arising from philosophy that maintains that God cannot be changed, God is the “unmoved first mover”, in contrast with the fickleness of the Greek gods or the seeming randomness of nature. His point is that God is unchangeable in his *faithfulness*; God can be relied upon to keep his promises and to accomplish his purposes. But, Berkhof rightly insists, God is endlessly creative and adaptive in the way he goes about accomplishing his purposes.

It seems to me that “changeable faithfulness” could readily be rephrased in the terms of our marital argument as “unpredictable dependability.”

In 2 Samuel 7 the key biblical ideas of kingship and temple come together, and the qualities of God’s changeability and/or faithfulness come into question.²

Did God intend Israel to have a king? If we read 1 Samuel 8 it would appear not, as God warns Israel of the likely consequences of their desire to be like other nations. Kings become corrupt or morally objectionable; kings impose taxes; kings press-

¹ Berkhof, *Christian Faith*. See pp. 140-141 for the rationale for pairing terms, and pp. 147-154 for the specific discussion on Changeable Faithfulness.

² The following owes a great deal of its ideas and content to Wright, *Twelve Months of Sundays*, pp.8-9

gang men into armies. Did God intend Israel to have a king? Maybe not; but here we find God bestowing favour on King David, and making extravagant promises of an eternal kingship.

Did God intend Israel to have a temple? The risk with temples, as with bronze serpents³ or other aids to worship, is that they become ends unto themselves, they become idols, they demand the sacrifice of ongoing upkeep or fall into ruin. I find myself a little suspicious of David's motives. Is this really about God's glory; or is it about, again, making Israel like other nations; or might it be an attempt to domesticate God, to keep God close so that we know what he is up to?

Whatever the case, in God's speech in 2 Samuel 7 God appears to have been quite satisfied with the status quo, in which he has dwelt with his people in a tent, moving about with them wherever they have journeyed. God has no need of a temple – a point which Solomon was strikingly to note when at last the temple was dedicated: Solomon says, "But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built!"⁴ God tells David he has no need of a temple, and yet God condescends to have one built, albeit not under David's reign.

But of course, at the same time God desires justice and mercy for his people, not unfettered anarchy. Kings have a good role to play in providing stable leadership. And God desires to be present among his people, not thought of as distant. A temple has a good role to play as being a place where people can be reminded of, and can encounter the very personal God.

Kingship and temple converge in 2 Samuel 7 as King David desires to build God a temple.

Some of you have already discovered that I enjoy puns. This is not something, apparently, that Christine admires in me. Her usual response is a groan and rolling of her eyes; occasionally it is a reproachful-sounding "Stuart!". Pity her when we go

³ See Numbers 21:4-9, and then 2 Kings 18:4.

⁴ See 1 Kings 8:27.

on holiday, because it seems that relaxation brings out the best (worst?) in me in this respect.

I love the fact that the Bible contains puns, and the neat thing about the pun in 2 Samuel 7 is that it works just as well in English as it does in the original Hebrew. David wishes to build God a “house”, a building. God declares that God will build David a “house”, a royal dynasty.

And while it is true that one day a temple was indeed to be built, it seems that there is something really important about the idea of the dynastic “house”. There was an appropriate way for the living, loving, uncontainable God to dwell in the midst of his people. The temple made of stone would point the way towards it, but it would remain an ambiguous signpost. The reality, rather than the signpost of God’s dwelling place, would be a human being, reflecting God’s image; a king, embodying and living out God’s wise ordering of the people; a man truly after God’s own heart, whose heart would go on to be broken by the pain of the world, but who would in that same moment render all manmade temples redundant.

God is changeably faithful, unpredictably dependable. God fulfils his promises to David, but does so, surprisingly, in the baby who is to be given the name Jesus. Mary is astonished to be chosen to become the temporary dwelling place of the living God. Like the physical temple, Mary will be filled with the presence of the Holy Spirit, and overshadowed by the power of the Most High God. In Mary’s womb temple and king come together once and for all, and the scriptures come true in ways never imagined. “Do not be afraid, Mary; you have found favour with God. You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob’s descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

It is in this extraordinary event that we find the ultimate fulfilment of the promise made to David.

In Mary God has found at last a house, neither tent nor temple, but flesh and blood, that would most truly and fully express his royal, self-giving love. In this amazing,

creative, unpredictable way, God exhibits his faithfulness, fulfilling his covenant promises: as the angel said to Mary, “No word from God will ever fail.”

This is all the work of the Most High God, in his changeable faithfulness. But this Most High God is also the God of intimacy with us, the God of love. Scripture is shot through with the idea of God dwelling among his people; not a god who is far off, aloof and uncaring.

In Exodus God says

Then I will dwell among the Israelites and be their God. They will know that I am the Lord their God, who brought them out of Egypt so that I might dwell among them. I am the Lord their God. (Exodus 29:45-46)

And the hope is mirrored at the end of the Bible, in Revelation:

And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, “Look! God’s dwelling place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. (Revelation 21:3)

Berkhof makes the point that it is due to God’s love that he is changeable in his faithfulness.⁵ Love, he says, “continuously reckons with its object”. In order to express faithful love, one has to adapt to the wants and needs of the other. This, God does, perfectly.

God making his dwelling among humankind is a most profound expression of God’s love for us. And that is found in its fullness in the person of Jesus, who is introduced in the first chapter of John’s gospel as the Word of God who

... became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.” (John 1:14)

God’s unexpected ways, especially in this profound mystery of incarnation (being made flesh), are an outworking of his covenant love for us.

⁵ Berkhof p.148

Within Mary, in the person of Jesus, temple and kingship dramatically converge, as if these two beams of light have been focussed together into a point of unprecedented intensity.

But let us keep in mind too that, because Jesus is who he is and because Jesus has done what he did in his dying and rising again, the two beams of light broaden out from him to become a floodlit mass of people. In Jesus, we become the inheritors of our faithful God's promises to Israel; in Jesus, we too become both temples of the Holy Spirit and co-rulers with him: as St Peter said in his First Epistle –

... like living stones, let yourselves be built into a spiritual house, to be a holy priesthood, to offer spiritual sacrifices acceptable to God through Jesus Christ. ...

... you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, in order that you may proclaim the mighty acts of him who called you out of darkness into his marvellous light.

Or as St Paul said in 2 Timothy

The saying is sure:

If we have died with him, we will also live with him;

if we endure, we will also reign with him. (2 Timothy 11-12)

and in 1 Corinthians

Don't you know that you yourselves are God's temple and that God's Spirit dwells in your midst? (1 Corinthians 3:16)

That we would be caught up in this mystery of temple and kingship, caught up in the work of God in the world, caught up by the love of God for his creation, is simply astonishing and seemingly makes no sense.

Let us rejoice that God's unpredictable ways are the outworking of his covenant love for us.

Sources:

- Tom Wright, *Twelve Months of SundaysL Year B*, London: SPCK, 2002
- Hendrikus Berkhof, *Christian Faith: An introduction to the study of the faith*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1986 [Rev ed; tr. Sierd Woudstra].