

21 July 2024

2 Samuel 7:1-14a  
Ephesians 2:11-22  
Mark 6:30-34; 53-56

*Our house, is a very, very, very fine house  
With two cats in the yard  
Life used to be so hard  
Now everything is easy 'cause of you...<sup>1</sup>*

*You are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.<sup>2</sup>*

Such a contrast between the quiet simplicity of Crosby, Stills and Nash's vision of humble domesticity, and the boldness of St Peter's affirmation of our identity in Christ!

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The Third Sunday in July is designated as National Bible Sunday, a day in which we give thanks for the Bible, and reflect on its significance and use in our lives. As we do so, it is helpful to remind ourselves that when we read passages from the Bible in our church services and for ourselves, we don't just read off the surface of what is in front of us: we have to understand what kind of writing it is (historical narrative, psalm, exhortation, parable, for example), the context of the passage, how the present passage relates to others, and above all how it fits with the whole sweep of God's saving acts with human kind. And we do all this in the presence of, and equipped by, the Holy Spirit of God.

Generally speaking, our lectionary takes us week by week through broad sweeps of books – currently we are working through 2 Samuel and key moments in the story of

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<sup>1</sup> "Our house", Lyrics by Graham Nash

<sup>2</sup> 1 Peter 2:9-10

King David, we step our way into the second chapter of Paul's letter to the Ephesians, and in the Gospel of Mark we come to the apostles' return from the mission they were dispatched on, in pairs, in the reading we heard a couple of weeks ago.

There is therefore nothing that especially joins these readings together. But I delight to find that, because of the way that the Bible conveys God's big story, there are surprising intersections between these unrelated readings. And these intersections are quite well summarised in that verse from the first epistle of Peter with which I began, especially in the idea of our calling to be a royal priesthood.<sup>3</sup>

You will have heard me say before that from the beginning God's appointed role for humankind was to be both a kingly and priestly one: we were made to rule the earth under God's ultimate kingship; and we were made to mediate between God and creation, praying to God for the world and witnessing to the world of what God has done.<sup>4</sup>

Thought of the kingly role was prompted in today's readings by Mark's comment that the people were like sheep without a shepherd. Shepherd is a kingly metaphor, expressing the idea that kings lead, protect, and provide for their people as shepherds do for their sheep, and finding amplification in King David's employment as a real shepherd in his youth.

Thought of the priestly role was prompted by the discussion about whether or not David should build a temple, a place in which priests would offer sacrifices and make intercession. And the temple theme is then employed by Paul in Ephesians.

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The ark of the covenant, symbol of God's presence with his people, had travelled with the people all the way from Mount Sinai in the time of Moses and across the River Jordan with Joshua, and was brought by David into Jerusalem with great

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<sup>3</sup> Peter quotes the Greek Septuagint version of Exodus 19:6, rather than the Hebrew text which literally translates as "a kingdom of priests". Grudem remarks "The difference is not one of great significance, for in either case kingly and priestly privileges are connected." [p.111, fn 1]

<sup>4</sup> Morris, *Revelation*, p.50 in relation to the priestly calling found in Rev 1:6

celebration. It was installed in a tent there, in the same way as throughout its history it had been housed in a tent whenever the people had stopped.

Now in his new capital city, David is struck by how inappropriate this state of affairs seems: "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent."<sup>5</sup>

But David is not to build a house for God, a temple. Instead, God is going to establish a different kind of house for David, a dynasty.

God had not asked for a temple. David was not to assume that he knew what it was that God wanted. We don't know David's real motives. Perhaps he was concerned that the fact the ark was placed in a tent rather than in a beautiful and expensive building implied that God possessed less glory. Maybe, though, he harboured ideas that were more about his own glorification, or thought that keeping God close might strengthen his power.

Why was David not to build a temple? The main reason is that a temple, a permanent home for the ark of the covenant, could lead to an incorrect understanding of the nature of God. God is not, and never has been, limited to a particular place. Ever since Mount Sinai, the tent in which the ark was placed provided a useful symbol that God was present with the people, but its portability symbolised that God was with the people *no matter where they were*. The risk was that a temple could itself become the object of trust and worship, rather than trust in, and worship of, God himself. A temple building is fixed, not only in place but also in form, creating the risk that it becomes difficult to adapt to changing circumstances. The massive work of construction could become an economic drain and administrative distraction, as could its ongoing upkeep. Do you notice interesting resonances here with the reasons God gave when warning the people off establishing a monarchy?<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>5</sup> 2 Samuel 7:2

<sup>6</sup> See 1 Samuel 8.

David is not to build a house for God. Instead, God is going to establish a house for David, a dynasty. God chooses this family for the privilege of being his instruments in enabling Israel to live within the covenant made at Mount Sinai in the time of Moses and to fulfil the covenant made with Abraham. God had chosen and blessed Israel to be his people: now, within that context God chooses and blesses David and his descendants. The monarchy in Israel is not merely a human institution but is part of how God relates to humankind.

It always amazes me that God chooses to work through mere, fallible, human agents – the kind of people who seem more at home in the song of Crosby, Stills and Nash than in Peter’s ringing affirmation. Surely working through humankind is a hugely risky approach. And the risks seem especially great when God chooses to work through a monarchy. It risks making the human beings involved become self-important, with ideas above their station, forgetting that their reign is subject always to God’s ultimate reign. It risks the human beings employing their status for their own selfish, self-serving, ends.

And as we read on in the biblical narrative we see all of this occur. The Bible is very honest about the fallibility of God’s human agents – David and Solomon included – and yet the Bible still upholds their chosenness and place in God’s purposes.

Human agents are living witnesses to the glory of God. Human beings witness to the glory of God because they, rather than any temple, become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

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And so we have come to Ephesians.

In Ephesians 2 Paul deals with the alienation that existed between Jews and Gentiles. It was a very deep division.<sup>7</sup> One manifestation of the division was the dividing wall in the temple. Outside of this wall lay the outer court or Court of the Gentiles. From any part of this court, the Gentiles could only look up and view the temple, but they were not allowed to approach it on pain of death.<sup>8</sup>

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<sup>7</sup> Stott, pp. 90-91.

<sup>8</sup> Stott, 91-92.

This is the background to Ephesians 2. Although all human beings are alienated from God because of sin, the Gentiles were also alienated from the people of God. And Paul's point is that Jesus Christ has done away with these two alienations.<sup>9</sup>

Paul pictures the new, reconciled in Christ, Jew-Gentile community in three metaphors: God's kingdom, God's family, and God's temple. The last is the most important for my purposes today: Paul writes, "In him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit."<sup>10</sup>

While the language is built on the picture of the temple, in a way we are back to the idea of the tent containing the ark of the covenant: a symbol of God on the move with his people. God is not tied to holy buildings, but chooses to dwell within, to work through, holy people. To this new society God has pledged himself by a solemn covenant. God lives in them, individually and as a community. God's dwelling place is his new society, his household, his *house* we could say, made up of his redeemed people scattered throughout the world.

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In Mark's Gospel the twelve apostles gathered around Jesus and reported to him all they had done and taught. Two weeks ago we heard how Jesus had sent them out two by two into the villages and towns, to proclaim his message and to heal. Now we read of their return to him. And we read of them going from place to place and ministering to the needs of people. It is not always what they want or need for themselves; it is driven out of Jesus' compassion for these people – people who are like sheep without a shepherd.

In the apostles Jesus is beginning the formation of a people in whom God indwells. It is a people on the move, going to where the needs are.

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<sup>9</sup> Ephesians 2: 14-16

<sup>10</sup> Ephesians 2:22

In our world today, we see that so many are struggling as sheep without a shepherd, so many are suffering under oppressive rather than loving rule, so many are erecting and fortifying dividing walls of hostility. Over against this, we need to be God's temple, God's 'house', the royal priesthood we are called to be, declaring the praises of him who called us out of darkness.

And if it is all this, then our house is a very fine house indeed!

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