

A CHURCH WITHOUT WALLS?

Jeremiah 7:1-15

Mathew 21:10-17

You may or may not know that the church of Our Lady of Wedale (named after an image of Mary which King Arthur is said to have brought from Jerusalem and deposited here) was at one time the principal seat of sanctuary in Scotland, and perhaps the oldest. That means that Stow, and particularly the church (not the church we have nowadays - but the chapel of St. Mary at Torsonce, and then the old church) was a place where people could come to escape arrest, or to find refuge. In more lawless time this was sometimes necessary: when justice tended to be summary, there had to be places where someone accused of a crime could hide until tempers had cooled and the matter could be gone into properly.

The primary meaning of the word sanctuary is a holy place, a place of worship, and it is because of this that they have also become known as places of safety. The use of holy places as places of safety still continues. Even yet we sometimes hear stories of refugees who are denied residency taking refuge in a church. A few years ago there were the Palestinians who took refuge from the Jewish authorities in the Church of the Nativity in Bethlehem. Churches are supposed to be sanctuaries - places of safety, where violence is not to be contemplated, where, protected by that other meaning of sanctuary as a holy place or a place of worship, people can find the protection of God's name.

What is true for churches has long been true for other places of worship, all the way back to the temple in Jerusalem.

The temple in Jerusalem was vastly important to the proper conduct of Jewish worship. It was far more important than the Mediaeval cathedrals were to Christianity - because these cathedrals were not the only place where people could worship. But, when you tried to implement the law of Moses strictly, the only place of worship - of sacrifice, which was at the heart of worship - was the temple. Nowadays we think of Jews going off to Synagogue - as indeed Jesus himself did. But back in Old Testament times, there were no synagogues. To worship still meant to make sacrifice, and to do that you had to go to the temple.

Of course other shrines sprang up from time to time - some more and some less in line with the commandments. But in the days before Jeremiah's ministry these had all become contaminated with the Assyrian cult of Asshur, and when Josiah reformed the religion, these were all swept away. Josiah's was a reform which proclaimed the importance of the temple in no uncertain terms.

But the project backfired. Jeremiah sees people who do wrong, who live lives which oppress the vulnerable - foreigners, widows and orphans - people who even go so far as to innocent blood, and who in their daily lives pay homage to the Assyrian gods, who then come to the temple, to offer their sacrifices and think that therefore they are all right. And off they go, their duty done, to live just as they had before. "This," they say, "Is the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord, the temple of the Lord." And they take it to be a place of sanctuary, of refuge of safety - from God himself.

And how often in the centuries since have we seen this - people come to offer the form of worship in a sanctuary - whether it is temple, church or mosque - and then they go out to live lives full of evil, unchanged in anyway. This is why religious people of all faiths have gained a reputation for being hypocritical. The watching world knows that worship ought to change us. They are right to be critical when it

does not.

The problem with looking on the buildings as places of sanctuary from God is simple: our holy buildings - Jerusalem's temple in Jeremiah's day and our churches today are, quite simply not our own, but God's. They are not places to hide from God's wrath, to appease him by ritual observance, but places to draw close to God and be conformed to his righteousness and love.

Jeremiah is appalled by what he sees in his day, how the religious reformation caused untold hypocrisy. He appeals to his people: first to their consciences, pointing out what they are doing: the he appeals to their reason - how can they come to the temple to hide from God and his ways? God is watching; and finally he appeals to history, reminding them of what God has allowed to happen to other places which formerly bore his name, but where he was not worshipped from the heart. Remember Shiloh, says Jeremiah, and remember what has happened to the people of the Northern Kingdom, who are now in exile.

Jesus was equally worried about the way people in his day regarded the temple. With the decline of the monarchy, it had become the great symbol of the nation. But again it was being used for purposes other than coming close to God. It was being used to make profit and defraud the poor; it was being used to boos nationalism; it was being used by many as a place of ritual, but not of true worship. And Jesus drove out the money-lenders and those who were selling and he echoes the words of Jeremiah, as he said: "My house shall be called a house of prayer; but you are making it a robber's den."

Jesus knew, as Jeremiah knew too, that prayer is the key to true worship. When we pray we come before God as we are, bowing in the presence of the holiness that is him. In prayer there is no place for hypocrisy, for who do we think we are fooling? Any worship, in a sanctuary or when we are alone elsewhere should lead us to prayer, and we should be suspicious of ritual which is designed to help us side-step praying, which pushes prayer to the side.

Jesus cleansed the temple, but of course it didn't stay cleansed. We are not told, but you just know that once they had recovered their breath and their dignity, the merchants and money-changers gathered up their spilled wares, mended their broken tables, re-captured their straying live-stock and were back in business the next day. And so, later in that momentous week, Jesus weeps over Jerusalem. And as he does so, he utters these words: "Behold, your house is left to you, desolate." (Matthew 23:38) What does he mean? Simply that the temple, which should have been God's house, no longer functions as a sanctuary. They can't take courage and pride and hope from it sitting there in the middle of the city, because it is no longer God's house - they have taken it over for their own purposes, so it is theirs. But our buildings cannot save us and even the temple was not to save the Jews. It fell in 70 A.D. Our buildings can only give sanctuary when they are used as sanctuaries - as places set aside for holiness.

The Jews thought that it could never happen that their temple would be destroyed, but they were wrong. We might think that God would never let it happen that this church should swindle to nothing, but a little history should put us right on that score. If we are not true in our worship, and if we do not let that worship transform our lives, then we too may become some of those who have discovered that God will not be mocked.

We have always taken great pride in our buildings. They are an outward sign to the watching world that there are people in this place who worship God and seek to live their lives by the love of his Son. We trust that when they were built, it was in

order that they should bring glory to God and serve his worship and the witness of his church. (Actually, there may have been mixed motives in the building of some of them - when they were built and maintained by the landowners, there may well have been an element of display which crept in!) We take a lot of time and trouble, and spend a lot of money maintaining our buildings. Recently we had the ceiling at Heriot re-painted; while now at Stow we are set to do battle with an area of dry rot which threatens the fabric of the building.

It is good that we should take trouble with our sanctuaries. People need a place to come away from distraction to pray and worship. And people need to have visible reminders of God's presence in our communities. But Jeremiah remembers that God can be found and can be worshipped and should be served anywhere and everywhere. He reminds them that God promises to be with them, not just in the sanctuary but in their daily lives in the land, if they will amend their ways. To be God's people we do not need to have buildings and walls. Following Christ is what comes first.

The message to us is clear. We should worship God in sincerity and truth, always coming close to him in honest prayer, so that we can live our lives transformed by being in God's presence; so that our lives and our worship are all of a piece, and not divergent. If we do that, then our sanctuaries will give sanctuary indeed - not from God, but in his presence, guarding us from all that would lead us astray and giving a guiding light to all who are astray and seek for the road home.

God grant that this is how we live and worship. Amen.