

LIVING IN GOD'S PRESENCE

2 Samuel 7:1-11,16
Luke 1:26-38

“I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit.” (Isaiah 57:15).

Today is the day that we will move back into Stow church. Yesterday we spent some time putting it to rights, and making sure everything is just so, and now it looks great and it will be a pleasure to be back there for worship.

Mind you, although there was a bit of a hassle each week, I haven't minded being in the town hall, and no one has said to me that they minded either. Because we have proved, if it needed proving, that as the song says “The church is wherever God's people are praising.” In my life-time I have worshipped in old buildings and more modern ones. I have met with the church in buildings with woven grass walls and thatch on the roof, and in open spaces in the woods. When I was in my late teens, studying in Aberdeen, an older man who had known my father used to take me round small groups of Christians in the Aberdeenshire countryside, who met in huts and halls which made Fountainhall hall seem palatial. I have worshipped in cathedrals and in homes. And I'm sure if you go over in your mind the places you have worshipped, you will be able to find quite a bit of variety as well.

The church doesn't have to have a building, and God doesn't have to have a building, but in Europe and North America at least, the idea of a church building is fairly iconic, and at this time of year it features in different, but similar guises on Christmas cards. Usually in a snowy scene, with light shining warmly out of the windows. Christmas time is perhaps the season when church buildings are most sharply in focus for the society in which we live. So for that reason it is good that we were able to get back in to Stow before Christmas - just.

Of course, we have two church buildings, designed by the same architect, but very different in style and in atmosphere. They are different in history as well. The Heriot Kirk is built in the place and on the foundations of previous church buildings, in a site right in the centre of old Heriot; Heriot before the railway first came, you might say. The people of Heriot have worshipped God in this current building for about 140 years, but they have worshipped in the same location for a lot longer than that. The building we have now was erected simply because the previous one became unfit for purpose: too broken to mend, you might say.

In Stow we have a grand building in a spectacular location, on the edge of the village. And we still have the ruins of the building it replaced, so we can see that what we had before was much humbler in size and in architectural pretensions. Of course, Stow had two fine, large churches, built at about the same period, when the fairly new Free Kirk and the Old Kirk were in opposition to each other. I can't help feeling that the fact of the Free Kirk, St. Andrews, being built in such fine style, in a good location, may have had something to do with the Heritors', or landowners', decision not to mend the old church any more but build from scratch in a fine, eye-catching location! I sometimes look at our beautiful building, which everyone admires so much, and wonder how much was to the glory of God and how much was the Heritors showing off their wealth and generosity - and how possible it is to disentangle mixed motives.

We do love our church buildings. People quickly become deeply attached to a church, even to their accustomed place in that church. So it is a little ironic to find

that when King David first planned to build a place for the worship of God where the arc of the covenant would be housed, which was the supreme symbol of God's presence, that God didn't want that at all.

Up until that point, although the people of Israel had been in the promised land for several generations, the place of worship had always been a tabernacle, a tent. And it seems that God liked the symbolism of tent-dwelling: the idea of people seeing him as a nomadic God.

For where does God live? In a church or temple? In heaven? What does he say himself? In the prophecy of Isaiah, the prophet has God say "I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit." (Isaiah 57:15). God is not one place or another. He is not either or; either in heaven or somewhere on earth. He is both and. He is both in the high and holy place and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit. Both in heaven, if you like, and with people. No mention of a building at all then. God is only in church when his people, people who want to meet him, want to worship, are in church. Where he always is, is in the high and holy place and with those who are contrite and humble in Spirit.

Mary was that. She was certainly humble in spirit, which is why on that very surprising day in her life she bows to God's will for her. She may have been young - almost certainly she was - but she wasn't stupid. She would know what people would think, and, beginning with Joseph, they did think it. She would probably have seen the way that other girls who had allowed themselves to become pregnant outside of marriage were treated: and the Law was that they should be stoned. This was not always applied, but there was always the possibility that someone might invoke it and decide that she was the one to be made an example of.

Mary must have known that God's plans for her would make life very complicated for a while. But she is humble, which means that she thinks her own convenience is not of paramount importance. In the convenience culture in which we live, where we are constantly told to be thinking about doing things and getting things to make our lives more comfortable or straightforward, Mary reminds us that humility does not look after itself first of all. Humility does not say "That would be a bother and I can't be bothered." When something needs done, the humble person is not the one who says "Let someone else take care of it, it's not strictly speaking my business."

Mary knew that at the least tongues would wag; she knew there might be trouble with Joseph: her marriage might be off, and no one else would take on damaged goods. She knew that a baby would be inconvenient, at the very least. She probably had no idea how very draining motherhood would be at times. But still she said "Here I am, the servant of the Lord; let it be with me according to your word." It's people who respond to God's challenges in that spirit who are those whom God can really use.

Mary was humble, which was fitting for the mother of Jesus, because God showed his own humility in the way he sent his Son; in the family chosen, in the fact of his birth as one of us. God shows his own humility in that remarkable statement that he dwells in the high and holy place, but also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit.

Jesus is humble, seen as the son (or, tongues would whisper, maybe not the real son) of the joiner. He was born in obscurity. But he is also the one who inherits the promise made to David. He is the King long looked for - though never in the right place. And he is great: the Son of the Most High. Just say that again. He is the Son, the offspring, of the Most High - the One than whom no one can ever be higher.

David wanted people to look at a beautiful building and think of God, but God wanted to be associated with the journey. We too have our buildings whose very presence in our communities is a reminder to people that God is in our midst: but we should never become so hung up on them that we forget that God is the God of the journey. God journeys with us, wherever we go, if we are contrite and humble in heart.

When I was a child, if one of us said something that seemed to my Dade to be a bit boastful he would comment dryly: “What was that book called? “Humility and how I achieved it.” As we grew older we learned to understand what he meant. Humility does not brag, and lest of all does it brag, even to our own inner hearts, about how humble we are: if you have to think about being humble, more, if you take pride in being humble, then you still have a fair way to go: and that is when contrition is called for.

It’s a strangely circular process. The more we are humble, not thinking of ourselves, or our dues, or our convenience, the more the Most High can live within us. Conversely, the more we are aware of the presence of the most Holy God, the humbler, the more ready to put ourselves out for him and for those who her sends to us we will be.

Here am I, the servant of the Lord,” said Mary. “I dwell in the high and holy place, and also with those who are contrite and humble in spirit.” says God. As this week we step from Advent into Christmas may we do so keeping our eyes fixed on God, the Most High, and on his Son who came in humility to be one with us, and may we embrace every opportunity for worship and service, for praise and thanksgiving that God puts in our way.