

SERMON

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“But will God indeed dwell on the earth?” Solomon poses the question as he stands, with the gathered people of Israel, before the extraordinary temple that has been built. This place, feat of engineering and scale, the centre of Israel’s efforts for so long, gleamed. And Solomon asks if God will dwell there. He answers his own question “Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built”! The name of God will dwell there, however. It will be the focus of the people’s prayer and devotion. And so Solomon stands in Jerusalem, surrounded by all the people of Israel, at the temple that was at the very heart of the identity of God’s people. He prays a prayer of dedication that the prayers made in that most sacred of spaces would be heard by the God the whole universe could not possibly contain – never mind this temple.

St. Paul is not surrounded by his own people. He is not in the temple of his God and his nation. St. Paul is in a place that represents almost everything that is *not* Jerusalem. If the Jerusalem temple is a temple to the one God of Abraham Isaac and Jacob, and if the temple represents the heart of chosen people of Israel, Athens represents the exact opposite. It is the centre of Greek and Roman religion. There are statues of gods everywhere. This is not a place filled with one holy chosen people, who are to witness to the blessing God has for the whole world by living holy lives set apart from the ways of the rest of the world. It is, rather, a place filled with a diversity of people from all over. Different nationalities and ethnicities and their divinities. This is not the purity of apartness, but the melting pot of religious diversity. Filled with different gods, religious practices, religious places, for different people of different identities it could not be more different from the ideal of Solomon’s Jerusalem. And Paul, as a good Jew, brought up in the traditions and ways of Israel and its temple is deeply troubled and distressed. He was at the heart of a culture that he had been brought up to believe was unclean, impure, idolatrous and degraded. Western culture may have come to view Athens as some kind of representative high point of classical civilisation and culture. But let us be clear – this is not the lens through which Paul would have viewed the place. He would have viewed it through the lens of Jerusalem, its temple, its holiness code, its devotional practices. Athens represents everything that was wrong with the pagan and gentile world.

So it is not surprising that Paul was distressed to find himself in this place. So how does he react to finding himself in what must have felt like a den of vice and inequity? What does he do? Does he lash out in a fit of iconoclasm, trashing the joint because it deserved it? Does he harangue the people there, laying into them? No. Instead, he heads to the places where people are gathered. Firstly, to where his own fellow Jews are, in the synagogue. But by no means does he head only to his own people. He heads then to the marketplace, into the hubbub of idolatrous, unclean Athens and he reaches out and engages with people. He engages in debate and dialogue, in such a way as the Athenians are intrigued, and want to hear more. He reaches out and finds a point of contact in the most unlikely place – one of these idolatrous statues to an unknown god. Paul takes that statue, takes that point of contact with a people so totally unlike himself, and uses it to begin to proclaim the message of the God of the whole world, the Lord of heaven and earth. Paul, formed by his worship at the temple in Jerusalem, formed by the law, scriptures, history and traditions of the Jewish people, reaches out way beyond his comfort zone, to tell those radically unlike

himself that they already know something of this God in whom they live and move and have their being – the God of Israel, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob. That God has reached out beyond God's own people Israel, and wishes to draw in, out of love, all the peoples of the world into God's Kingdom.

And what was it that Paul was proclaiming in that marketplace which represented everything so alien to him? In his way, what he was proclaiming was the answer to the question that Solomon posed back at the dedication of the temple. "But will God indeed dwell on the earth?". Solomon recognised that however precious the temple was, however, holy the temple was, it could not possibly contain God. Paul and the Christian tradition make a much bolder assertion than that, though. What we are told that Paul proclaimed was 'Jesus and the resurrection'. The Christian faith, often to the bemusement of our friends of other faiths, often to the bemusement of people of no faith, claims that the God who even heaven the highest cannot contain, was made fully present in the midst of human life and culture in a person – the person of Jesus. The Christian tradition claims that if we want to truly and fully comprehend the one in whom we live and move and have our being, we need to look front and centre to the person of Jesus. Even more outrageously, that is to look to one who was tried, found guilty by the authorities, put to death as a criminal, and who 3 days later returned to life in the resurrection.

All of this gives us as Christians a rather a complex understanding of the importance of specific places. Within the Christian tradition, our own Reformed tradition has been perhaps on the most sceptical end of spectrum of views about the importance of place. We do not tend to the view that some places are more important than others. That some are sacred and some are secular. John Calvin, who we might look to as some kind of ancestor figure in our tradition, spoke of the whole of creation being the theatre of God's glory. He, like Solomon, sees that God cannot be contained in a mere place. Calvin goes so far as, it is said, of locking the doors of the church in Geneva outside of the times of worship so people fully understood they were to engage with God in their daily lives, in their homes and in the public square – not think of God as someone to be engaged with only in the supposed holiness of a building.

For we do not believe that we encounter God any more profoundly in a building, or any particular place. We believe we encounter God most profoundly in Christ, mediated to us through God the Holy Spirit. And we encounter Christ in each other – in the midst of the body of Christ. And Jesus tells us, we encounter him in the faces of the hungry, the thirsty, in a stranger, in those needing clothes, in those sick, in those in prison. We encounter Christ, and so encounter the living God, both in our worship, in our prayer lives, and in our lives of relatedness with others. The greatest commandment, Jesus tells us, is to Love God with all our heart and minds and soul and strength and to love our neighbour as we love ourselves.

So what is it exactly that we are doing here today as we come to dedicate this building, this place, in a tradition rather sceptical of claiming anything too special for buildings or places? In part we are giving thanks. And my goodness, what thanks there are to give. When I first got a sneak preview of the transformation that had been wrought in this place I could barely have been as awed had I been standing in front of Solomon's temple. The creative vision

that took a building with the most impossible layout, in the most tightly confined sight, that had just something of Fort Knox about it, into one which is light, transparent, has a natural sense of flow and spaces fit for the middle of the 21st century. The work that Archangel the architects, Coulson's the builders, all the myriad contractors and the Downing Place Buildings Group have done is just extraordinary. A manifestation of the divine gift of human creativity if ever I saw it. And we dedicate it, as a house of prayer and worship, as a place of encounter with Christ as we encounter one another, and as we encounter strangers who become friends, as the hungry are fed, the thirsty given a drink, and the needs of the world as far as are in our power are tended. It is a home of the people of God, the Body of Christ. But just as Solomon was deeply aware that the temple could not possibly contain God, we would never wish to say that this building could possibly contain God. But I want to go beyond that, and say that this building can never contain even the body of Christ the Church. This may be a home of the Church, where we are fed and nourished in our faith, where we encounter the living God in the risen Christ the living Word, through the Word of God in Scripture, the Word of God proclaimed and the Word of God bodied forth in bread and wine and water in the sacraments. It may be a place of encounter between the Church and the world, where new relationships are made and in doing so, we find ourselves face to face with Christ. But it is ultimately a place we go out from into the world, God's world – the theatre of God's glory. Like St. Paul we are called to head out into the marketplace, to encounter the world on the world's terms, finding those points of contact that allow us to live out and proclaim the good news that Christ is risen. Our call is to seek the transformation of individual lives, the lives of communities and the whole life of the world.

What excited me so much as I travelled some of the way with Emmanuel and St. Columba's as we became Downing Place was that the vision which emerged was not just about a building. It was only in part about a building, a building as a place of worship, a place of encounter with Christ and a place of encounter for the communities of Cambridge, and especially perhaps those who feel ever further squeezed out of the city centre. But it is also absolutely a vision of being out and about in the city. Building partnership with others of good will and a vision for the common good to seek the transformation of individual lives and the lives of communities. A vision of literally being out and about on the streets of Cambridge through Pioneer ministry. And at the heart of all of that stands the God who the heavens cannot contain, made known to us in the person of Jesus through the power of the Holy Spirit. This building is a home, a place of encounter, a resource, but more than anything else, a place for the Church to go out from, such that it is found in the homes and workplaces and marketplaces of this city, where those are found who live and move and have their being in God, but who may not yet know fully what that means. So let us give thanks for this remarkable place. Let us dedicate this place to the worship and work of God. And then let us fulfil our call to be Downing Place, by heading out from this place to God's place – the big wide world, to make known the God who cannot be contained by the heavens we yet we know in the person of Christ. Christ crucified. Christ resurrected. Amen.