

## The Temple

(A sermon preached at St Andrew's Church, St Andrews, 19 Nov 2000)

1 Sam 1:4-20

Heb 10:11-14, 19-25

Mark 13:1-8

If you stand, as I know some you have, on the mount of Olives to the east of Jerusalem, and look back across the Kidron valley to the old city of Jerusalem, the view is glorious, but you are looking at one of the reasons why a resolution of the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians is so difficult. What you're looking at is the site of the temple, the great platform which Herod the Great shortly before the time of Jesus constructed around the hillside, but on it stands, no longer of course the temple but the dome of the rock with its fabulous golden dome. That makes it both the holiest of places for Jews and the second holiest place in the world for Muslims. The view is the one Jesus and his disciples saw when they left the temple by its eastern gate, crossed the valley and sat on the slopes of the mount of Olives to talk. What stood where the mosques now stand was one of the most magnificent buildings in the world of its time. Herod, for reasons of his own, had spared no expense in rebuilding the Jerusalem temple on a far greater scale than the previous one had been. You can still see in what survives, which is just the platform, the huge blocks of stone that were characteristic of Herod's buildings all over Palestine. Those were the stones of which Jesus said: Not one will be left upon another. Forty years after Jesus spoke the Romans razed the temple to the ground and it was never rebuilt.

Why not? I don't mean that as a historical question, which would need a rather complicated answer. But as a theological question - why did God let the temple, which in the OT is God's own place of dwelling with his people on earth - why did God let the temple cease to exist? It's our reading from Hebrews that gives us an answer to that, but first let's attend to our OT reading. Just for once I find I can preach a sermon that ties all three of our readings together. All three readings have something to say about the temple. The two NT readings are about the temporariness of the temple, its provisionality in God's purposes, the fact that it had to give place to something better. But let's first, from our OT reading, appreciate just a little of how good the temple was, how the temple really was God's blessing and grace to his people Israel, and how we can still learn from what went on in the temple.

In Hannah's time, a whole millennium and more before Jesus, there was not yet a temple in Jerusalem. The portable temple, the tabernacle Moses made in the wilderness, had found a semi-permanent home in the temple at Shiloh. Later David would move it to Jerusalem, and Solomon would build the first Jerusalem temple. In 1 Samuel 1 we have a story of an ordinary Israelite family visiting the Temple. Elkanah and his family evidently made a family pilgrimage to the temple once a year - not for one of the festivals, but just their own family visit. They went there of course because God was there. God is also everywhere else, the OT is quite conscious of that. But God made himself specially available to his people, present for them in a special way, in the temple, and the way to approach God and to know God was by means of sacrifice. Elkanah and his family went to offer sacrifice to God.

And they usually had a wonderful time. Sacrifices were not just about sin. From a NT perspective we maybe get the impression that sacrifices were all about forgiveness of sins, because that's the sort of sacrifice the NT is most interested in. But sacrifices fulfilled all sorts of different functions in Israel's worship. Elkanah and his family might well have offered sacrifices for sin and purification when they arrived at the temple. God's presence was holy, even dangerous, and worshippers needed to be pure in heart and body in order to come into God's presence. But the sacrifice they really came to make was one of celebration, thanksgiving, rejoicing in God's presence by having a jolly good meal in the presence of God. They would have brought a sheep or a goat or even a cow: this would be one of the few times in the year they would slaughter one of their domestic animals. The blood was poured out at the altar, the fat was burned on the altar, the priests took a piece of the meat, and the family themselves shared most of it. What they were doing was offering back to God a token of God's goodness to them. They were celebrating the fact that all the good things of life were God's gift to them, and so as they shared the meal together they were thanking and praising God. You only need to read some of the psalms to get a sense of the enormous joy that Israelite worshippers experienced in God's presence when they went to the temple. There were solemn moments, there was awe in the presence of God, but there was probably even more sheer exuberance of praise and festivity, rejoicing in all that God had done for them and given them.

On the occasion of our story, though, one of Elkanah's two wives Hannah couldn't share the rejoicing. I don't need to repeat the story, but notice how Hannah was able to pour out her heart to God. There was room in God's presence for grief as well as for joy (that's something important about worship that we also need to remember). And Hannah knows a thing or two about the meaning of sacrifice. She makes a vow to God. Often people would pray to God and vow that if their prayer was answered they would offer sacrifice in the temple in thanksgiving for God's goodness. If we misread it that might sound like making a bargain with God. But what it was really was a way of taking very seriously the fact that God is really the giver of good things. The sacrifice was a way of acknowledging - and publically acknowledging so that other people could rejoice too - that the gift was from God. Hannah does something better. She says that if God gives her a child she will give the child back to God, she will dedicate the child to God. In a way that's what we should all do with everything we receive from God - God's gifts are given so that we can give them back to God in gratitude and in putting them into God's service.

Well, let's turn to Hebrews, and a passage that may seem, at first sight, to be rather negative about the temple and the sacrifices that went on in it, so concerned is the writer to make his readers aware of the fact that what God has done for them in Christ is not just better, but qualitatively different. In the light of the sacrifice Jesus, the great high priest of heaven, has made, the temple sacrifices turn out to be imperfect and provisional. The writer to the Hebrews is not denigrating the temple. The NT writers are not in the business of rubbishing the law of Moses and the temple and the religious institutions of Israel. Not at all, they were God-given. They were God's provision for his people. They were gifts and blessings from God. If the temple had been pretty worthless, then the author of Hebrews wouldn't really have been saying much about Christ when he says that what Christ has provided is better. It's because the temple was a wonderful gift of God, his real dwelling-place with his people, and the sacrifices provided by God so that his people could experience his grace - because

of that Hebrews can say: isn't it amazing that what God has provided for us in the sacrifice of Christ is even better, so that *by comparison* the sacrifices of the OT fade. In the end it becomes clear, Hebrews says, that the value they had, real value, they had because they foreshadowed Christ's sacrifice. They were provisional indications of the real thing that happened when Jesus shed his blood and offered his body in sacrifice, and as the high priest of heaven entered the very presence of God in heaven so that all of us who benefit from his sacrifice may do the same.

What is it that's better about it? The main thing that Hebrews says here is that Jesus' sacrifice is complete and final. He has done once and for all, for all time, everything that will ever be necessary for us to come into the immediate presence of God. He has made *the* once-and-for-all sacrifice for human evil, the sacrifice that can really do away with the guilt and the effects of sin in our hearts. He has opened the way into God's presence such that we have free access, Hebrews says, authorized by the high priest into the inner sanctum of the temple where God dwells. What especially comes through in this passage of Hebrews is the assurance, even certainty we can and should have on the basis of what Christ has done: We have confidence, the writer says, to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus; we should approach in full assurance of faith; we should be unwavering in expressing the hope that Christ has given us. There's no longer any doubt, Jesus leaves us in no doubt that God is gracious and merciful and invites us into his presence.

This confidence and assurance has nothing, of course, to do with self-confidence. Self-confidence is no doubt important in human relationships, but it's quite inappropriate before God. Self-confidence will get us nowhere before God. Any even minimal true sense of God's holiness should destroy any confidence in ourselves when we stand before God. Our confidence rests entirely on what Jesus has done for us and God has assured us.

Coming to God with assurance and confidence perhaps nowadays too easily suggests the sort of chummy God we easily feel comfortable with because he's really just like us. But that isn't at all what the author of Hebrews means. His God is still the God whose holiness in the temple was awesome, even dangerous. At the end of chapter 12 of Hebrews, we're told to worship God with reverence and awe, because our God is a consuming fire. *Our* God is a consuming fire. God hasn't changed, either in his holiness or his love. To come into God's presence is still an awesome privilege as well as experience of his welcoming love. But the message of Hebrews is that we have been *guaranteed* that awesome privilege by the blood of Jesus who is both our sacrifice and our great high priest. Eli, the high priest in Hannah's time, was able to assure her that God would answer her prayer. Jesus, our great high priest, has already, even before we asked or thought of asking, assured us for all time that we are welcome in the immediate presence of God.

Realising that is, of course, what the eucharist is all about. But there's something more: remember those sacrifices of fellowship and thanksgiving and rejoicing in the presence of God that Elkanah's family enjoyed in the temple. Hebrews, in its own way, goes on from the sacrifice that authorises to enter God's presence to the sacrificial fellowship with each other and celebration in God's presence that we then enjoy. Verses 24-25 read: "We ought to see how each of us may best arouse others to love and active goodness. We should not stay away from our meetings, as some do,

but rather encourage one another, all the more because we see the day of Lord drawing near."