

North Kildonan United Church

15th July 2021 ~Gay Todd

“Building a House of God”

II Samuel 7: 1-16

Mark 6: 30-37

Most young people starting out as school leavers rapidly discover that building a magnificent house is beyond all but the very rich, let alone the most impressive temple in the country. Even King David had to start small. As a shepherd boy, much of his early life with all its difficulties and dangers must have made building a very distant goal.

Certainly his reported killing of Goliath of Gath marked a change in his reputation and from that point his fortunes began to change. However, looking at it objectively, even once installed as a favoured young man in King Saul's household, there can't have been much peace for that young man. His music and popularity might well have won favour with the young women, but for Saul they were also signs of a threat to his position. Remember that incident when Saul irritated by David's singing and the adulation directed his way, flung a spear at David and David had to run for his life pursued by Saul and his soldiers.

On the positive side he did have gifts and strengths. For example, he was magnanimous in offering mercy to Saul when he found him asleep and defenseless in a cave. He also developed a wonderful relationship with Jonathan, showed mercy to Abigail and demonstrated great skill as a military leader as he led his men in one dangerous skirmish after another.

When eventually David did achieve enough of a victory over his enemies that he could enjoy the spoils of war, his first thought after building his own house was to build an inspiring temple out of cedar.

Times of peace and plenty are no doubt the very times where such building can be contemplated, yet such building carries with it the suspicion that David rather thought that in so doing, people would not only acknowledge the God in whose name the building was to be established – but they would also know that in another way this was going to be David's memorial.

There is always an uneasy relationship when notions of God get caught up with the rich and powerful. Leslie Milton points out that despite the obvious connection to Judges and prophets – and the religious laws and principles found in such things as the Torah – when Kings and those who wield political power start mediating and housing what they call God's power – this can lead to a deep ambivalence. Think for instance of King Henry the eighth wresting the Church power away from Rome and vesting the leadership and wealth of the Church of England with himself. It would be difficult to reconcile the following war against the Catholics and the sacking of their

Churches in England with Christ's message of humility and compassion.

Think also of the corruption of Rome at its worst with a Church groaning with riches, and the scandal of indulgences being challenged by Martin Luther. Think the crusades or the subjugation of the people in Central and South America in the name of the superpowers and the Church. Even today, think of Mr. Trump's claim to be a Christian and his and his followers' attitude to refugees.

So what of those who see the dangers mounting? Should they speak up?

And that brings us to Nathan. You have to feel sorry for Nathan, caught between his position of being a royal prophet wanting to support his royal master with all the sense of obligation for patronage that this entails on the one hand, and on the other, his conscience requiring him to tell the king he was wrong, and that in effect God was wanting something quite different.

The problem in fact may have been with David himself. The Old Testament presents David as a very complex character with flaws to match his undoubted gifts. The same David who was said to have slain Goliath was also on one hand a womanizer, a rapist, one who arranged the murder of his friend and general Uriah, apparently in order to get his friend's wife. Second Samuel tells us just how wrong David's subsequent actions could be. Yet Nathan would also have known that here too, on the other hand, was one said to be a composer of at least some of the Psalms, one who had the apparent loyalty and support of his people, not to mention the power to deal harshly with those who got in his way. It was to this unpredictable patron Nathan must give his reluctant advice.

He presents it to David as God's message in three simple parts. As you listen to it, wonder that perhaps the words might also be intended for people a bit like us.

Nathan tells David that God effectively says: *"Sorry, but I didn't ask David to build this temple. A simple tent would be good enough. What I did ask was that David should keep my commands."*

Then again, through Nathan, God further says: David's reputation and name based on a life well lived is ultimately far more significant than any building he might put up.

And finally Nathan relays from God: What I need is for David to rest from his enemies and focus on giving the same love for his family as I have shown for him.

We are so used to the notion of great buildings built to celebrate God and the various saints that their grandeur can sometimes blind us to some serious basics. I guess the test question is whether or not the building is consistent with the notion of a loving God and compassion for the people, not just the favoured people. These days we might even ask: do the people of the building, perhaps even people such as us, follow the golden rule?

Well if that was the test then David's dream of a cedar Temple comes up well short. In reality of course the Temple would have had to have been paid for by the

spoils of war and no doubt largely built by slaves. Since the heavy cedar would have had to have been carried many miles, probably barefoot from the hills by those on subsistence wages at best, it could hardly have been built in the spirit of a God of love.

Unfortunately, it is a message that has been very slow for David and his many successors to understand. In a way it is the message which strikes at the heart of conventional Christianity as well. It is the message that it is the relationships which matter more than the trappings of religion.

David's Temple proved a disappointment in the long run. Built and rebuilt several times – destroyed by enemies and the focus of much enmity. The contrast with what Jesus taught could not have been more marked. Not for Jesus the need for a magnificent building. If anything Jesus himself was the temple to be sacrificed for others.

Even his mission was of the sort that required him to care not about buildings but about those who shared his tasks. All of which brings us to look again at our New Testament Gospel reading for today.

I don't know if you have noticed but Mark rarely goes into much detail about what Jesus is teaching and appears to be more interested in the way Jesus interacts with those who come into contact with him. Time after time Jesus appears to notice not just who is there but what they bring to the meeting.

Because we look at a different reading each week with our lectionary it is tempting to see each of the stories as isolated events. However, as Mark tells it we can see that what happens is not just what Jesus decides according to his master plan. He may be intending to build a kind of Temple – but his church or temple is built from willing hearts, not bricks and mortar, nor even with cedar. His focus on the human needs means he constantly has to take backgrounds and changing situations into account.

I think it is also significant that Jesus is not some super being who simply overcomes all odds with a word. His teaching and healing met almost total failure in his own home area. Capernaum was very different to Tiberius. Nazareth was not the same setting as Jerusalem. In today's Gospel for example, Jesus also made allowances for such factors as the fatigue and worry of the disciples. Remember the event which we looked at last week in the beheading of John the Baptist who was after all Jesus' cousin. Small wonder then, that Jesus was anxious to give his disciples a break after hearing that depressing news.

Perhaps this is a pointer for our own planning. In the same way that we might plan a Church programme in our leaders' meetings or in the seclusion of the study at home, that programme absolutely must take into account the situations of those we are expecting to deliver the programme and even more importantly those for whom the programme is ultimately intended to serve. Perhaps this is why rather than organize the big events to wow the crowds we need to be constantly adjusting what

we are trying to do for the personal situations of those to whom we minister.

It is very human to want to be seen as successful and I guess that many of us in our own way would like to leave something that sums up our life for others to admire. Remember David thought it should be a Temple. Yet for Jesus this Temple would not have been a building – he cared too much about the people he met. Perhaps Nathan was speaking to more than just David when he said in effect a life well lived is more significant than anything that can be structurally built in God's name.

There is a subtle difference between a house and a home. The house is a structure. The "*home*" is focused on those who live there. Perhaps we might get closer to remembering what Nathan was on about if we could only focus again on turning the house of God into a home, a home where all might find a place.