

Sermon – 5th before Lent 2019: Ezekiel 43:27-44:4; Luke 2:22-40

Temples were the chief places where ancient peoples went to worship the gods, even to find their gods – the gods in some sense were present there. We all will know of the temples of ancient Egypt and Greece and Rome: their massive stone structures, their dramatic statuary and carvings, and of some of the things that used to go on inside them – sacrifice and other things. In these temples you might have sacred animals living, divine images – such as cats – and you would often have colossal statues of the god to whom the temple was dedicated. Even today in Thailand and India there are temples with sacred animals living in them – cats, and rats too. But not in the same temple, I think.

Our reading from Ezekiel is a passage from his massive eight-chapter long description of a vision of the temple of the people of Israel. It is a vision of an idealised, future, restored, actually an other-worldly temple – vast in scale, with palm trees and rivers and courtyards and galleries and chambers and gates and innumerable pillars – that Ezekiel says he had in the twenty-fifth year of his Exile in Babylon. He yearns for the homeland that has been lost, the real Jerusalem, and for a future restoration to it expressed in the ecstatic vision of an *other*-worldly restored and massively expanded and glorified temple and city.

This is a passage to which we return again and again in church – it culminates with a description of water flowing from the thresholds of the temple north, south, east and west; water which flows for thousands of cubits – a kilometre or more – becoming deeper and deeper until it is a river that cannot be crossed. You will perhaps remember the passage – because at its end the tone changes, it humanises as the river becomes a source of simple, happy lives – with people standing fishing beside it, spreading their nets, and with trees for food growing on both sides whose leaves do not wither and whose fruit do not fail. It says, “Their fruit will be for food, and their leaves for healing.”

And throughout, Ezekiel is also telling us what people should do in the restored temple of the future. These instructions concern how sacrifices are to be made, of what kind – whether of a whole bull or a simple grain offering – and how much, that there should be honest balances to ensure people are not treated unfairly when their offerings are being weighed out. The instructions also concern why sacrifices are to be made – to celebrate the new year, to celebrate the Passover, to celebrate the Harvest, and indeed to consecrate the altar. It is from the passage about how to consecrate the altar that our reading came.

For Ezekiel, the temple in his vision is a vision of his tradition vindicated by God and restored to more than its full glory; the restored temple is depicted as a place of deep mystery and of awe, a gateway where God is to be encountered by his people – and it expresses a contract, a covenant between them. For ancient peoples, temples were the chief places where you worshipped and encountered gods; but for the people of Israel the temple was more than this, it was an expression of their identity: there was one temple, and only one Lord, one God, the God of Abraham, of Isaac and of Jacob who had saved one people, and he was to be worshipped on Mount Zion, in Jerusalem.

As you know, Jesus’s parents Mary and Joseph bring him to this temple in Jerusalem to carry out the thanksgiving sacrifice for his birth as their firstborn son. So the Lord, the God of Israel enters his temple in the arms of his parents. The temple to which he is brought is a living place – as in Ezekiel’s visions, but more gravity-bound and contained – and among the people living there are of course Simeon and Anna. These are the people who typify the heart of the life of the temple of Jesus’s day, who typify its true purpose. They stay there, worshipping and praising and living out their days deliberately, watching and praying for a future which is good for God’s whole people and God’s whole world, a future of freedom and justice and peace, the kind of world for which good souls watch and pray today. Indeed, Simeon and Anna are the kinds of people you find today in many parish churches and cathedrals and college chapels – the souls of their place, the ones who watch and wait and work for the good of others and the good of our whole world. And Simeon and Anna, the beating heart of the living temple in the Jerusalem of Jesus’s day, recognise him.

From that recognition flows a total reimagining of what it means to worship God and where God is to be found and known. In a sense, the prayerful, watchful lives of Simeon and Anna already hint at this. They and people like them were – were always, perhaps – the soul or life of the temple. Not the rituals, and certainly not the sheer scale of sacrifice that went on, but the prayerful and watchful people devoted to the worship of their God. Prayerful and watchful people like Joseph and Mary on their visit, or permanently in place as Simeon and Anna were.

Because from this point Jesus is shown as turning the temple inside-out. The lives in its middle are shown to be the reality of its existence, not the massive walls of stone by which they seem to be surrounded. Jesus preaches that he is now the temple, the place where God is to be known – destroy this temple, he says, and in three days I will raise it up. And Jesus teaches us that our lives are now the temples of God where God is to be worshipped, and he enables this by breathing his Spirit onto and into his disciples, so that as Paul teaches we are temples of God's Holy Spirit.

The temple now is the individual and collective lives of God's holy people everywhere. Ezekiel's vision of the temple ends with the simple, happy lives of people enjoying the banks of the river as they fish in the shade of trees for food and for healing, for the healing of the nations. Now, we realise, those people aren't *in* the temple but they *are* what the temple has become. Amen.