

22nd October 2017

Exodus 35.20-29

Many years ago when I was training to be a minister I had a placement with a Catholic priest in the inner city of Manchester in the district of Moss Side. Moss Side in the eighties and nineties was a virtual no go area because of its high levels of crime, gang violence, deprivation and unemployment. I remember the first time walking into the Catholic Church in the middle of Moss Side and being shocked and startled by the opulence of the church. It had marble statues, ornate features, gold leaf frescoes and the like. My initial reaction was that this was a complete scandal. The church was so rich and wealthy yet was located in one of the poorest wards in the whole of England. My anger was only tempered by my knowledge that Father Phil, the Catholic Priest, lived sacrificially and often went where angels feared to tread.

There was an elderly woman in the church praying with her rosary beads. Eventually she got up to leave, so I introduced myself. She asked whether I liked the church expecting me to say yes and confirm her obvious pride in the place. I said I was struggling with how beautiful and

opulent the church was compared with what you see when you go out of the church door. The woman looked at me and said ‘but this is where we come to get a taste of heaven’

The woman I later discovered had lived in Moss Side all her life. She, like the rest of the locals, struggled with their day to day conditions and environment. But I came to a new understanding of the importance of church buildings through that encounter.

As we remember the 500th Anniversary of the Reformation in a couple of weeks time, non-conformists like ourselves, who did not conform to the State Church of England and the Prayer Book, originally had the high view that God was not confined to a building and that Christ was in each of us so that when we met together Christ was with us. Early non conformists churches were therefore called ‘Meeting Places, rather than churches. They put the emphasis on functionality – being able to see and hear everyone, especially the preacher, rather than aesthetics and whether the architecture and stained glass windows gave a feel for the holy. The early church we told ourselves, didn’t meet in churches they met in people’s homes, broke bread together, shared in the scriptures,

prayed and cared for each other. The fellowship was more important than the fabric of the building. We don't 'go to church': the church (the people) gathers in a building, worships together and then the church goes out into the world.

I recently spoke to a Cub Scout group that came and visited the Tab. I teased them at the start by saying 'welcome to Dursley Tabernacle – but unfortunately the church is not here'. They looked at me with bemusement. 'But we're meeting in the church' they said. 'No, the church hasn't been able to make it', I said and then showed a picture of you lot. The point being the church is the people – this is the church's building where the church meets.

However once the early church became established and became the religion of the Roman Empire it started building elaborate basilicas and churches and cathedrals.

I must admit, I love visiting Cathedrals and churches. I love art, particularly religious art. I don't believe these things are unimportant and I personally feel that the Reformers threw the baby out with the bath water. Throughout Christian history there has been a tension

between worshipping God who is unseen and needing something tangible, something seen, in order to worship God and a place to worship God.

Last week we looked at the story of how Moses asked to see the face of God. This came about because whilst he had gone up Mount Sinai to receive the Ten Commandments the Israelites down the bottom of the mountain got anxious and worried that both Moses and God had abandoned them alone in the desert. Aaron, who is now in charge, decides in desperation to calm their nerves by getting them to make a golden statue of a calf. Most commentators suggest that the Golden Calf is not another God that the Israelites decide to worship but actually their crude representation of their God, the God of the Israelites. Aaron says in Exodus 32.4 'This is your god who brought you up out of Egypt'. They needed to look at something to give them reassurance that God was still with them.

Moses comes down the mountain with the Ten Commandments, the second of which says –don't make graven images – whoops! So God and Moses aren't too pleased. God wants to give up on them but Moses talks God round and then needs some reassurance himself that

God is still with him. Hence the request to see God's face – which is what I talked about last week. And if you remembered I suggested that we do get glimpses of God's glory to help sustain our faith at times.

Interestingly though, whilst the Israelites are making their golden calf, God is giving detailed instructions to Moses to build a Tabernacle – a tent of meeting, which would be a physical meeting place where God would be especially present to meet with the priests of the people. It will contain an outer courtyard, a holy place in the tent of meeting which would have within it a lampstand, a table holding the bread of presence, an altar for burnt offerings and an ark of the covenant containing the ten commandments and symbolising the presence of God to be their God if they obeyed the commands within.

The ark, a gold-overlaid wooden box, (think Indiana Jones and the Raiders of the Lost Ark) was the focal point within the tabernacle where God's presence rested. Once a year the high priest was to sprinkle blood on the solid gold cover of the ark as atonement for all Israel's sins. This cover, which was called the "mercy seat," where the blood was sprinkled, was the specific place where God could and did meet with humanity.

When you read the New Testament, the letter to the Hebrews makes the claim that there is no need for sacrifices now because of the blood of Jesus on the cross. The cross of Christ reassures us that God loves us and forgives us and allows us access to God through Jesus.

There are detailed instructions on how to construct the Tabernacle. It is a well-executed tender document! The tabernacle would emphasise the holiness of God, the otherness of God. Like a sterile environment nothing impure could enter. Only chosen priests who had gone through cleansing rituals were allowed in.

It set the template for centuries of obsessiveness over what was clean and what was unclean for good upright religious people. This still has repercussions today. People think they have to be good and pure to come to church. They think that being holy is boring, sterile, and lifeless. Whereas they well know they are full of passions and emotions that are not clean and wholesome so they think they are ruled out of God's presence.

Jesus as God in the flesh, would cut through those purity laws by touching lepers and menstruating women and the

demonised, and the gentiles, among others and show how a holy God reaches out to others in love and mercy and restores relationship.

The building of the Tabernacle is of course a blueprint for any joint endeavour – whether working together as a church or indeed any other corporate exercise. So let us reflect on the process they went through.

I. THERE WAS A TIME OF CHALLENGE 35:4-5

Moses came to the people and said, “I have a message for you from God. I want you to build a house for worship.”

There was an invitation to take part in a great endeavour. There is a truism that only when something costs us do we appreciate it, and that facing, meeting and overcoming the challenges of life make the life of faith vital and alive.

II. THERE WAS A TIME OF CONSECRATION

The Giving was from a Willing Heart. 35:5

“Then everyone came whose heart was stirred, and everyone whose spirit was willing, and they brought the LORD’S offering for the work of the tabernacle of meeting, for all its service, (vs 21-22)

The words translated “heart” and “spirit” both refer to the

inner person. The verb translated “stirred” and “moved” then, refers to some kind of movement on the inside. They did not respond out of guilt or duty, but rather out of love.

When does God’s grace stir our hearts and move our spirits? If so, we have the great and awesome privilege of responding to that grace by giving to God’s cause, whatever it may be, with our material resources, serving him with our spiritual gifts and obeying him with our whole being.

The Giving was Widespread in Participation

It appears that all the people, men and women, rich and poor, brought gifts of all kinds (21-29). Their stirred hearts caused them to seek and search for ways to give, not excuses for why they could not give. Everyone was involved.

III. THERE WAS A TIME OF CONSIDERATION

It is remarkable to realize that nothing is said of the immediate reception which greeted his words ‘let us build a place of worship’.. Quietly, gradually, orderly they departed to consider the words of Moses.

This offering was not made on the spur of the moment.

This offering was made with prayerful consideration. They retired from his presence to consider the challenge and what their part was to be.

Perhaps they reflected on how God had miraculously delivered them from slavery in Egypt. When was the last time you reflection on what God has done for you in salvation. Secondly, they remembered how God had miraculously provided for them. (Manna) Finally, they realized how God had marvellously blessed them. As they looked around their tents they realized they possessed nothing that had not been given to them by God. And neither do we.

They gave what they could and worked together as one people with different gifts and different roles.

As the new Area minister for Gloucestershire I preached at the induction of Eric Massey in Brockworth yesterday. The text I was given was 1 Corinthians 12.

. This is a well-known passage where Paul makes the analogy of the church and the human body. We are all members of one body. We all have different roles to play, we are all needed – the weaker parts or the less presentable parts need to be treated with special honour and respect.

They are just as valuable as the more presentable and stronger parts.

I once had to preach on passage from Paul's first letter to the Corinthians to a Presbyterian mission church in the middle of the Ghanaian jungle. I had my sermon written out and prepared. What I wasn't prepared for was the fact that all the women in this African village went around topless. It very distracting to be preaching on the parts of the body when the front row of the church was full of young women, baring all. Some were breastfeeding babies, all were smiling at the visiting preacher.

I had never paid much attention to my tutor at college who said, 'don't make eye contact with the congregation: just preach to the doors at the back of church'. But that day, such advice made sense.

You can never be fully prepared for any of the challenges of life. But how you respond will determine whether you grow through those challenges. One of the most important tasks for any effective team, and any church that is to grow – is to get the right people motivated and willing to do the right jobs that fit their gifts and callings.

We can speculate as to which part the minister will be. Some ministers have a big head, some have a big mouth, some are a pain in the backside. All of those descriptions are of course derogatory. Sadly, we are in a culture that likes to have a go at leaders. Any one brave enough to step forward to lead will be a target for criticism. That comes with the turf, sadly. But leadership is always needed for any organization to achieve the tasks before it.

IV. FINALLY, THERE WAS A TIME OF COMPLETION

By Exodus 39:43 Moses sees the finished Tabernacle and says this is good. With any task we want to look back and say we have completed what we began.

It was wonderful to hear of the Tabernacle by Grenfall Tower and how they responded to the tragedy and God's provision for them.

Our Tabernacle continually needs renewing and sustaining with people whose hearts are stirred for God's work in this place. But we can also stop and give thanks for all God's

provision in the past and pray for God's continued provision.

There have been, there are and there will be many challenges put to this church. We will face personal challenges, corporate challenges in our family life, at work, in groups we belong to. A time of challenge, consecration, consideration and then completion. May God help us to discern His call. Move us, stir us and give us willing hearts to be part of His work.