

A house for God / a house for David

This is now the third week in which we have been looking at David's rise to power as king over Israel. And the past two weeks we have been trying to read this story with some suspicion, recognising that there is more going on than meets the eye. There are undercurrents and subtexts which require us to read between the lines. So, for example, last week we read of how with great song and dance David brought what was known as the Ark of the Covenant up to the city he had chosen as capital, Jerusalem. The Ark of the Covenant was the focus for God's presence, indeed it was believed to be God's throne and David here is effectively placing God's throne alongside his. And I was raising the question as to whose rule is really being established here, whose authority is really being sanctioned and legitimated: God's, or David's? Is David here serving God, or is God being pressed into the service of David?

Now we move on in the story and we find a very interesting development. David's power has been established by military conquests and victories and now he decides it is time to build a temple for God. After all, he is now living in a beautiful house made of cedar - shouldn't God have a big house too? And he consults the prophet Nathan who initially gives his blessing to this enterprise, but that same night the word of the Lord comes to Nathan and overrules him, saying that God has no desire to live in such a temple. It would compromise God's mobility, God's freedom, God's sovereignty. And we can't help but feel that God has out-smarted David here. God is only too aware that if he felt compromised being parked beside David's throne in the mobile, portable Ark of the Covenant, how much more would God be shackled to David's rule dwelling in a huge, dominant temple? God knows that a temple will all too easily become a royal chapel, taking the authorisation and legitimation of David's rule one giant leap further. So God says no. And note here that we are introduced to one key figure in the power dynamics of Israel and that is the prophet. The prophet is vital to the royal court because the prophet is able to speak against the king. The prophet brings a word from beyond the trappings of office, speaking truth to power.

Nathan is therefore attentive to the Word of God and he is prepared to counter any power-games that David has in play. And indeed Nathan will later deliver a stinging rebuke to David after the episode that marks the low-point in

David's reign, his affair with a soldier's wife and his arranged murder of her husband. Nathan the prophet is not afraid to confront the king. What Nathan tells David here, however, is fascinating. No, says Nathan, you will not build a house for God, but God will build a house for you. As we read in verse 11, 'the Lord declares that the lord will make you a house...', and then in verse 14, 'Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me, your throne shall be established forever.' And what a remarkable promise and commitment that is! God is telling David, your descendants will rule as King. There will be a Davidic dynasty. Previously kings have been appointed randomly with divine, charismatic power coming upon them direct from God - but no longer. Now kings will be appointed by succession, from the line and lineage of the house of David.

Now, once again, this must surely arouse our suspicions! David's rule is guaranteed here, and not just his but his descendants forever. There are no conditions, no commitments required from David and his descendants, no 'ifs' or 'buts'. And we must ask, is this really divine promise, or is this royal propaganda? Is the word of God being co-opted here to serve David's ends? Well, maybe there are hints of that, but Nathan is no fool and will not be so easily pressganged into the service of the king. So we must take this promise seriously and we must take from it a lesson about divine grace. Here we see something of God's firm, unconditional commitment to us that clings on through thick and thin even when we reject and spurn God - as later kings would. It's God's covenant love and commitment that holds on even when it is spurned and violated. Now, that is not to say that there is no conditional element whatsoever. God says through Nathan that when one of David's descendants sins '... I will punish him with as rod such as mortals use, with blows inflicted by human beings.' In other words rebellion and resistance to God will backfire and lead to suffering and defeat. But through it all God holds on. And that is something we need to hear today as much as ever: resistance and rejection of God will cost us dear and bring its consequences - but God remains faithful even when we are not, and that is the foundation upon which our relationship with God is built: unconditional, steadfast love.

There is, however, still a problem about this promise. The fact is, it didn't come true. There came a time, after defeat by the mighty empire of Babylon, when a king from David's line no longer ruled. Indeed look at Israel today. It's a secular state that doesn't even have a king, far less a descendant of

David. So what has happened? Has God's promise failed? And this is where we must realise that this promise that there would forever be a Son of David on the throne can only be understood in the light of Jesus, the Christ. We can only make sense of this promise in the light of the one who was of the line of David and who now rules forevermore, who presides over a new Israel, a new people of God – this is the new household of God spoken about in our reading from the letter to the Ephesians. You see, the dynasty of David died in the sands of history and this passage with its promises and commitments to David failed – unless we read it and think of Jesus and the Church. And what I want to do now is to look at three features of this passage and see what we might learn about what it means to be the church, the new Israel, the new house of God ruled by this Son of David who is Jesus, the Christ.

So let's turn first to David himself, the king. Israel is a kingly nation, but what David and his descendants have to realise is that their purpose is to bear witness to another king, to the Kingship of God. This is the crucial thing about Israel's monarchy – it points beyond itself to God. Israel's king serves a greater king. And that is the first thing that we learn about us, the church, the new Israel. What is it for? Why are we here? What's the point? Well, the point and purpose of the church is to bear witness to God, and to the Lordship of Christ and to the coming of his Kingdom. That's why the fundamental confession of the Church is 'Jesus is Lord' and that confession is as much needed and as urgent as ever in a world of competing gods and where human life falls prey to all kinds of false gods. In a world ruled by money and sex and power and violence and vengeance and greed we are here to bear witness to the rule of God and of his Christ. And the rule of the God spells freedom. From the days of Egypt when God trounced Pharaoh and led a people out of captivity the hallmark of this God's rule is liberation – liberation from every other God that would rule us. And such a God is first and foremost to be worshipped.

That brings us to the second feature of this passage, the temple which is in David's heart to build. And the good reason why David wanted to build a temple, the valid reason, was because he knew that Israel was called to be a priestly nation. It had a divine vocation to worship God and indeed to represent the other nations of the world in offering up worship to God. And in due course Israel got its temple and from the temple God ruled and to the temple there came the offerings of the people. And the temple was understood as God's house, the centre of the cosmos, the axis around which everything revolved.

Here all creation is open to God. Here there is a ladder between heaven and earth with traffic between the two. Here the joys of the world and the pain of the world are brought before God; here the laughter and the sighs and the groans of the cosmos are uttered before God and prayers for the world are offered up. So as well as being a kingly, royal community the Church, the new Israel, is called to be a priestly community, a royal priesthood.

Then, however, we also encounter in this passage the figure of Nathan, the prophet, who is entrusted with God's Word. And this is the third feature of the new Israel, the church. It is a prophetic community. As the new Israel we are entrusted with these writings, with these old texts, these ancient stories, these strange narratives that we read over and over again. And as we read them we are drawn into a strange world. We're drawn into a strange world presided over by this strange God who at times seems irritable and unpredictable, and who at times seems overwhelmingly gracious, but who in Jesus Christ has been revealed once and for all to be full of grace and truth. And thinking as we are of the house of God and the house of David, so we realise that the Bible and strange world that it draws us into becomes a house for us, a home, our dwelling place. I love this: one great theologian has said that in Holy Scripture 'we are in our Father's house where the children are permitted to play.' Isn't that wonderful: Holy Scripture not as a book of rules for living; Holy Scripture not as a boring book of outdated tales but Holy Scripture as our true home, the place to which we return over and over, a place which call us. And here we play. Here we engage our imagination bringing these ancient texts to life, making them live. And as we do there emerges a Word, the Word of God that speaks to our world today as much as it ever did through Nathan.

So David – for whatever motives - offers to build God a house. Instead God promises David one – a dynasty. That promise was not quite what it seemed. If David could have seen the future he would have seen that promise cashing out in the distant figure of Jesus of Nazareth. And beyond that he would have seen a new Israel – us! This would be a royal community, ruled by this king and bearing witness to his Lordship; and it would be a priestly community, entrusted with worship and prayer on behalf of the world; and it would be a prophetic people entrusted with God's word. This is what we are called to be. Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
eternal sovereign Lord,
dweller in majesty and holiness
and maker of all that is,
you are far above and beyond us,
forever out of our reach,
forever mysterious and unknowable.
How can we, mere mortals approach you?
How can we ever know you?
Yet you have come to us and made your home with us,
dwelling with us in Jesus of Nazareth.
And by your Holy Spirit you come even closer,
entering our hearts to dwell in our lives,
closer than blood, closer than breathing.

God we praise you, universe maker
who makes your home among us and in us.
O God, forgive us that we close our hearts and lives to you.
Forgive us that we turn from you and resist your love.
Come to us once more we pray in grace and forgiveness
and make you home in us,
that our restless hearts may find their rest in you.
We pray in the name of Jesus, Emmanuel, Go with us,
And we pray together in the words he taught us, saying...

O gracious God,
we pray today for your church throughout the world.
Help us to live up to our calling.
Give us wisdom in discerning your Word
and imagination and courage in proclaiming it,
and so us make us a prophetic people;
By your Spirit inspire our worship and lead us in prayer
that we may be a priestly people;
and may we embody the Lordship of Jesus Christ,
that we might be royal, kingly people
and a place where signs of your Kingdom are glimpsed.

O God bless your church we pray.

And God, bless your world,

This week we have been remembering the downing
of Malaysian Airlines MH17 and that tragedy reminds us
of the world we live in:

a world of conflict and war,

a world of terror where fanatics go to any length to
secure their ends;

a world where disaster comes upon innocents
who have no part in the conflicts
they find themselves caught up in.

O God bring peace and reconciliation to this troubled world.

And bless we pray those in particular need at this time,

Bless the sorrowful, suffering from recent bereavement;

bless the sick, longing for healing;

bless those who are searching for truth and who
do not know where to turn to find it...

We pray all these things in the name of Jesus,

Our prophet, priest and king.

In his name we pray. Amen.