

2 Samuel 7:1-17; Ephesians 2:11-22

22.07.18

### *David's dynasty*

So the story of King David that we have been following in recent weeks continues. David, conqueror of the great Philistine champion Goliath, has become king of Israel and has made Jerusalem his capital city. And last week we heard about how David brought to that city the symbol of God's presence, what was known as the ark of the covenant, a sacred chest containing holy objects and housed in a tent and the focus for God's dwelling among his people. And David has built himself a beautiful house, a palace made from the finest cedar trees imported from abroad, and he is now at peace – or 'at rest' as our passage puts it: '... the king was settled in his house, and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him...' And we shall return to that word 'rest' for it is an important one, but for now David looks around at his successful and comfortable life and he spares a thought for God. 'Here am I living in a house of cedar, why should God dwell in a tent?' And so David resolves to build a house, a temple for God. And to begin with the plan is approved by the prophet Nathan – but then it is rejected by God. God protests that he has always been on the move, a tent dweller, and has never asked for a house. I'm reminded of certain homeless people who I have been involved with in my ministry who have no desire for a home or to settle down. That is simply not their way. And social services may run around trying to arrange accommodation but such stability is too high a price to pay when the heart is restless and seeks only the refuge of the road. And indeed what God says to David contains perhaps an implied criticism of David's palace. In verse 7 God says, 'Wherever I have moved about among the people of Israel, did I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'why have you not built me a house of cedar?' And note God's reference to Israel's leaders as shepherds, for shepherds are rootless, with nowhere to lay their head and only the sky and the stars for a roof. And God goes on to remind David that he was once a shepherd: maybe there is an implied rebuke here: what are you, a shepherd, doing living in a palace?

Furthermore, perhaps David's motives for building God a temple were not as pure as they may seem. After all one thing we as human beings would love to do is to tame God, to domesticate God, to put God in our pockets. And no doubt that building, that temple that David planned would have stood next to his palace, and it soon would have become a kind of royal chapel, legitimating and glorifying David's policies and baptising his administration - and home to an idol. And it is so important that we read these stories about David with this element of suspicion. We are dealing here with human power and power games and as we've seen before in this series on David, God knows that humans are too self-interested and self-serving to handle power well. That's why God never wanted Israel to have kings in the first place: we cannot be trusted.

And if David's motives for building a temple may not have been as pure as they may seem, our suspicions are further aroused by what follows in this passage, God's commitment to David's dynasty, God's assurance that his descendants would rule for ever. It all hinges on a pun: God says to David, 'no, you won't build me a house, but I'll build you one.' And he's referring here to David's dynasty, 'the house of David' that will rule forever in Israel. God decrees that David's succession is secure, his throne established forever. But we have to ask whose interests are being served here. In a world where human beings vie for power, is it not convenient to know that you are chosen and legitimated by God? What hope for any rivals when David's line has been chosen and established forever? His dynasty is divinely ordained - apparently. So how do we distinguish between the Word of God and blatant propaganda? Where does David's desire to build God a house, and God's apparent choice of David's descendants become an exercise in self-serving idolatry?

And we're not just dealing with ancient history, for when it comes to domesticating God and claiming to be specially chosen by God - well, some things never change. I'm reminded of a quote by the then Bishop of London, John Aylmer in 1559, justifying England's fight with its Catholic enemies at the time by saying, and I quote, 'God is English, for you fight not only in the quarrel of your country but also, and chiefly, in defence of His true religion and of His dear Son Christ.' There you have England's vocation, to fight in defence of God and true faith. And that impression was only reinforced not long after by the translation and publication of the King James Bible. The

wide dissemination of that Bible, particularly throughout the British Empire, seems to have conveyed the impression that not only is God English but that he speaks eternally in seventeenth century English. And given our setting today in this church here in Amsterdam, we recall how this conviction of being a chosen people has been passed on from England to America, helped by the exodus imagery that we find in our reading this morning, where God speaks of bringing the people up out of Egypt. For the early pilgrims who went to America and who we commemorate here in this church and in our stained-glass window, that imagery of an exodus was too powerful to resist as they crossed the sea to another promised land. John Winthrop was one such pilgrim who led the first large wave of immigrants to the New World in 1630 and who preached a sermon in which he described the New England community they were setting out to establish in Biblical terms as ‘a city on a hill’. And subsequent presidents have used that imagery repeatedly to speak of America’s divine vocation, its ‘manifest destiny’. And the point here is not to be anti-English or anti-American but to recognise how power works and how empires seek legitimation and how easy it is to take God’s name in vain.

So, with all this in mind, I want to take this passage in a different direction. Rather than legitimating power, I want to take this passage as the starting point for another story, a counter-narrative that is about the life of faith, about you and me and our relationship with God. And we start with a God who will not be tamed and caged in a temple but who is forever mobile, based in a tent or tabernacle. Such a God cannot be captured by us, by our theology and our concepts and our mental constructs but is always beyond our grasp, elusive, mysterious. And in the fullness of time this God finds a home on earth, a place to rest, not in bricks and mortar but in one called Jesus of Nazareth. And so the evangelist John spoke of God literally, ‘tabernacling among us’, or ‘pitching his tent among us’ in the flesh of Jesus Christ. By this time – despite God’s promise in today’s reading - David’s dynasty had long since fizzled out and for centuries there had been no Davidic king on Jerusalem’s throne. But now there comes the true David, the true King, the true shepherd, the true heir of David’s line and heir of God’s promise. And he built no cedar wood palace for his house and unlike even the foxes who have their dens and the birds who have their nests he

had nowhere to lay his head. But he offered rest to others. He offered rest to the off-cuts and outcasts of his time who laboured under heavy loads. To them he said, ‘come to me all who labour and are heavy laden and I will give you rest.’ And we tried to seize him and to pin him down on a cross and we tried to house him in a tomb but he escaped and he is always on the move, always ahead of us, beckoning us to follow.

From that tomb, however, that busted tomb which could not hold him, there emerges a new dwelling place for God, a new temple. This time, again, it’s not bricks and mortar and this time it’s not the flesh of Jesus either, but rather a community of people – you and me! Paul writes about it in our reading from his Letter to the Ephesians. He writes of a new structure whose cornerstone is Jesus Christ and where together we become a new temple where God dwells. Here ancient divisions and animosities are overcome. Here is reconciliation and peace. And here we find rest. We, who often feel like aliens and strangers in our crazy, power-mad world; we, like Israel in our reading, find rest from our enemies and rest for our souls - we find it here, in the church, the Body of Christ, the living temple of God. And we strive to make it a place of rest for others, other aliens and strangers who seek rest and refuge from the power-games and power-trips of this world.

One last thing, however. The whole notion of rest with which we began, with David finding rest from his enemies, is double edged. The church may be God’s temple, but God is still on the move, still the mysterious un-pin-down-able God that he has ever been. And that keeps the life of faith on the move and it means that there is sense in which we as Christians are never at rest, but always restless for God, restless for God’s rule, God’s Kingdom. To find rest in God can be a great blessing, but it can also make us complacent and satisfied and turn God into an idol. And next week we will hear how being at rest got David into deep trouble and led to serious sin. A restless faith is one that wrestles in prayer. A restless faith is one that is hungry for the Word of God and wrestles with it. A restless faith is one that is impatient with sin and evil, be it in ourselves or in the workings of the world. A restless faith is one that faces doubt squarely and that dares to question.

So we return to the beginning with David, ensconced in his palace of cedar, with his dreams of building a temple for God, with his dynasty

assured and given divine sanction. He was at rest. His God, however, was not. This exodus God is always on the move. Yes, he finds rest in the temple that is his people and there the weary and the rootless find home. But God grant us a holy restlessness that ever seeks the elusive God who will not be domesticated, idolised or pinned down. And to whom be glory forever. Amen.

### **Prayer of approach**

Holy and gracious God,  
eternal sovereign Lord,  
dweller in majesty and holiness  
and maker of all that is,  
you are for 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, God with us,  
And we pray together in the words he taught us, saying

## Prayers of Intercession

O loving God,  
in Jesus Christ you have laid aside glory and power  
and come to dwell amongst us,  
the Good Shepherd who cares for the flock  
and who lays down his life for the sheep.

We pray today for rulers and authorities and all in power,  
that they may be motivated  
by a concern for the common good  
and not their own ends and interests.

And you who in Jesus Christ have broken down  
the ancient wall that divided Jew and Gentile,  
come we pray and break down the walls that divide us,  
the walls of prejudice and suspicion.

Grant that we may live in a world  
seasoned with compassion and goodwill.

We pray today especially for the middle east,  
for the peace of Jerusalem,  
that it may include the peace of the Palestinians  
and justice and security for all.

O God, bless your church, your living temple.  
Come and make your home amongst us  
and inspire our life, our witness and our worship.  
Your Word tells us that  
we are no longer aliens and strangers but citizens  
of the household of God.

So we pray for our work with refugees  
and especially for the work of Human Aid in Greece  
with which we are linked.

O God let this church be indeed a place  
where no-one feels a stranger.

And bless those, we pray, in particular need today:  
the troubled and the anxious, the sick and the weary.  
May they find rest. We pray all these things in the name of Jesus Christ our  
Lord and Saviour. Amen.