

Finding God

1 Kings 8.1-11, 22-30, 41-43

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When King Solomon had finished building his Temple for God, and when the Ark of the Covenant was then brought into that Temple, it was a glorious day.

Imagine the change this meant for Israel and its religious services. They had always worshipped God in a tent, and now this tent and all that was used for the worship in that tent, was brought into this permanent majestic stone building.

For many who had so loved to worship in that tent, it must also have been difficult. Was this change necessary? 'Has God not always blessed us in this past, so why this new thing?'

But after the priests had carried the Ark of the Covenant into its proper place, in the cubicle room that we call the Holy of Holies, I think any apprehension of the people was gone. They could see with their own eyes that this move pleased God.

When the priests came out of the Holy Place, a cloud filled the house of the Lord, so that the priests could not stand to minister because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled the house of the Lord.

1. Where can we find God?

Finally Israel had a fantastic Temple - a house for God. 'Now we know where God lives, where we can find him', Israel may have thought. But in fact, that was not correct.

God had been with the people in Egypt; and in the desert; He had helped them; He blessed them, even before they had their tabernacle. The tabernacle, just a tent, had always reminded Israel of God's presence wherever they went.

The tabernacle had always been such a blessing for Israel; it had been the heart of their religious and their national life, it had been the place where they met with God; it had been the place where the celebrated with sacrifices; where God forgave their sins.

And now they had a much more permanent place.



There is a danger in being too attached to a place of worship. There is a danger too make your experience of God too much attached to where you have always worshipped, or how you have always worshipped Him.

That is dangerous, because it can make it very hard to deal with change. It may even seem that God is far away, if we get so attached to the same building, the same worship. That can even become an idol for us.

And Solomon was very aware of this danger, it seems.

Let me first point you to the time when the final version of the story that we read was penned down. The editor of the books of 1 Kings and 2 Kings - they were originally one book - wrote these stories shortly after Israel had been taken to Babylon in captivity, and their glorious Temple in Jerusalem had been totally destroyed.

2. So where is God?

‘So where is God now? His Temple - his house - is destroyed. And we, His people have been scattered!’



When bad things happen to us, we may ask the same question. Where is God when we need him? Or when we go through a time of change, will God bless us as he did in the past?

How could the story of the inauguration of that great Temple of Solomon help the people of God after their Temple was destroyed and after they were scattered and taken to Babylon?

For those people in need, feeling depressed maybe because of changes, feeling that God was far away, it was important to listen carefully to Solomon's prayer at the inauguration of the Temple. And we can learn from it as well. Let me repeat that prayer:

Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in the presence of all the assembly of Israel and spread out his hands toward heaven, and said, "O Lord, God of Israel, there is no God like you, in heaven above or on earth beneath. [...] Will God indeed dwell on the earth? Behold, heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you; how much less this house that I have built!

Yet have regard to the prayer of your servant and to his plea, O Lord my God [...] that your eyes may be open night and day toward this house, the place of which you have said, 'My name shall be there,' [...] And listen to the plea of your servant and of your people Israel, when they pray toward this place. And listen in heaven your dwelling place.

Even when the glorious Temple was opened, Solomon recognised that the building was not the real resting place of God, after all. Even heaven cannot contain God - how could a house, build of stone, contain God?

For Israel, scattered over the earth, even to Babylon. this was good news. God can be found anywhere, even in Babylon. Even though the old comfortable place where they always met with God was gone, God still fills heaven and earth with his presence.

Now this statement, God is everywhere, does not mean that God does not connect himself, for our sake, with special places or events. Solomon did not deny that the Temple was very special. That is where God could be especially found. That is also where animal sacrifices had to be brought for reconciliation between God and the people. There, and nowhere else.

If people say, 'I do not need church, I can find God in nature', they create a wrong contradiction. Surely, God can be found in the beauty of nature. That helps us to come closer to him.

But God has also decided that He can in a much deeper way, in a more meaningful way, be found in special places and events. And He has ordained that we find him especially when we commemorate the great sacrifice of the Lamb of God in Holy Eucharist.

Let me unpack that a bit.

3. Jesus

When Jesus spoke with a non-Jewish woman, a Samaritan woman, she asked him about the Jewish Temple - that Temple was not the original Temple of Solomon that had been destroyed. She spoke of the second Temple, which was actually even more glorious than the first one. Is that Temple the place where we have to pray - where we can find God? or can we find him in our own Samaritan Temple, in our own way, on our own mountain?

What did Jesus answer?

Jesus said to her, "Woman, believe me, the hour is coming when neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem will you worship the Father. You worship what you do not know; we worship what we know, for salvation is from the Jews. But the hour is coming, and is now here, when the true worshipers will worship the Father in spirit and truth. [...] The woman said to him, "I know that Messiah is coming (he who is called Christ). When he comes, he will tell us all things." Jesus said to her, "I who speak to you am he."



This was a crucial moment. Jesus underlines that Jewish worship was the right worship, that is where God could be found.

It is not true that we can find God in any religion, or that all roads lead to Rome. What we teach about God matters, and how we worship God, matters.

But Jesus also clarified that soon, this Jewish worship in the Temple, would no longer be relevant for those who want to find God.

The Temple in the time of Jesus was also to be destroyed, as punishment for the unbelief of the nation of Israel. Jesus often spoke about this and predicted this in the Gospel stories.

But the destruction of that Temple was also a meaningful symbol. Because Jesus presented himself to the people as the ultimate Temple of God, the Temple of stone was no longer needed.

God is everywhere - but if we want to find God, where is He when we need him most? Jesus is the best place to look for God. He is the Temple.

He is the one who - in his person - reconciled man to God by being the eternal - once-for-all sacrifice. And he draws all people to himself.

And we as church are also called a Temple in the New Testament - because we are part of Jesus Christ. God is everywhere, but he is particularly present in Jesus Christ who is present in the community of his people. In our midst. That is where he promised to be, when only 2 or 3 are together in his name.

And as a Temple, our role is not unlike the Temple of Solomon - we are to be the place where others find God. We are to be the place where people are reconciled to God. And we have a mission to make the name of God known all around us.

Solomon also prayed for those others, for the nations.

Likewise, when a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, comes from a far country for your name's sake (for they shall hear of your great name and your mighty hand, and of your outstretched arm), when he comes and prays toward this house, hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name.

That is an amazing prayer; when Israel was at the height of its power, both religiously and politically, Solomon asked God for what?

He asked God that he would treat Israelites and foreigners totally equal. 'Listen to us, God, and listen likewise to them'.

... do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel.

The Temple of God was supposed to be a house of prayer for all nations. Israel was not blessed for its own sake, but for the sake of the world. God wants to be known in all the earth.

So the Israelites in the diaspora, in Babylon, Rome, Egypt, could know that God was not far from them, but also that He had given them a task to make his name known among the nations.

This was Abraham's calling - 'I will make you a blessing for the nations.' It was also Israel's calling. To make God known among the nations. And we, people of God, have the same calling.

Conclusion

If we need God, we come to the place where he can be found best. Yes, He inhabits the universe - but He is best found in his Temple , our community of Christians.

And our community is strongest, most intense, when we together as one people, commemorate the great sacrifice of Jesus Christ, and if together we participate in that sacrifice.

So if like the people of Israel in Babylon, you feel you are far from God, if you lost hope in the midst of change - then take communion to let God be closer to you than at any other moment.

Thank God - He can be found - and He never lets go of you. He is always and everywhere present with you.

And let it be our duty and our joy to let our light shine around us. We are tasked by God to invite the people we know to come and find God in our midst.

So invite your friends, family, colleagues, to come to church, to listen to God's Word, to participate in our community and in our communion - so that more people find their God who fills heaven and earth and is ever present as our loving Father to help us and bless us.

+ Amen