

Sermon Advent 4 Year B 2017

I am sure you would be aware how in this country the issue of housing affordability consumes so much of our public imagination. You would be aware how the issue of home ownership has such symbolic force. A great deal of value – of personal worth – seems to be invested in whether one has their own home or not. The issue is compounded perhaps because we have big expectations. Many other countries in most of their cities do not have the history or the baggage we carry: of the quarter acre block, the suburban utopia of lemon trees and washing lines and gardens and a paddling pool for the kids. This now seems all but unattainable for the average Jo (and Jill), but remains part of our collective and cultural longing. But it *does* reflect a deeply human need: to create an environment we can control and exert our own personal influence over; a place where perhaps we might leave some small legacy. No wonder a crisis of worth in so many of our young people. With most jobs meaningless and no guarantee of security, and no place to call home, where, then, do we leave our legacy?

The reading from the Second Book of Samuel we hear today speaks of King David's concern to build a fitting house for the Lord. Here, too, perhaps a question of legacy. As it is told to us, David has just settled into his new palace and it is becoming a source of embarrassment to him that, while he lives in such comfort, the Lord – whose presence is represented by the Ark of the Covenant – is still housed in a tent. The tent – the tabernacle, the abiding sign of God's presence amongst the people of Israel – had been 'God's house' during the long years of wandering in the desert to the time when David ruled as king in Jerusalem. When David tells the prophet Nathan about this, the prophet seems to agree: *"Go, do all that you have in mind; for the Lord is with you."*

But on that very night, a very different message came to Nathan from the Lord. *"Go and tell my servant David: "Are you the one to build me a house to live in?"* So then, (in a part that is not heard in today's reading) God tells David, that since the days Israel had left Egypt up to the present time he had been moving around in a tent with his people and that the Lord never once complained about this arrangement; he never once was heard to say: *"Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"* And instead of focusing on what David had or hadn't done, attention turns to what *God* had done. It is God that that David had been taken "from the pasture" (where he had been a shepherd boy) and made prince over Israel. God who had been with David and his people, had protected them from their enemies. And if that wasn't enough, God assures that he will make David's name great. The point of all this is that while David thought he would attempt to build God a house, instead, *God has built David a house.*

In due time, of course, a temple will be built. Not by David but his son Solomon. Even as God established - builds - a house for David, so that house – David's descendants – come to build a house for the Lord. Today's portion from Second Samuel ends, *"Your house and your kingdom shall be made sure forever before me; your throne shall be established forever."* The key to understanding this passage is to be aware of the meanings given to the word 'house'. It refers to the palace that David has built for himself; the temple that Solomon will build; *and* the dynasty which is inaugurated in David. He will not be the one to build a house for the Lord in the sense of a temple building, but he will lay the foundations for a different kind of house, the House of David, the dynasty and long line of kings who will come after him.

The image of the house is so resonant – and indeed why it is chosen for the church to hear today – because of the 'house' God chooses for himself in the womb of the Blessed Virgin Mary. In the Gospels, the line of David is seen reaching down to Jesus. In the

Gospels he is often referred to as, 'Son of David'. In the Benedictus, the hymn of praise sung by Zachariah after the birth John the Baptist, we hear, "*Blessed be the Lord, the God of Israel, for he has visited his people, he has come to their rescue and he has raised up for a power for salvation, in the house of his servant, David.*" The idea is emphasised once in what we hear today. In the opening line we are told of the '*virgin betrothed to a man named Joseph, of the house of David.*'

As we know so well, the angel informs Mary that she is to bear son, who will be *Son of the Most High* and *Son of God* and that the Lord will give him *the throne of his father David*. *He will rule forever and of his kingdom there will be no end*. The old promise that David's house would be established forever is now to come good! At the time of Mary's encounter with the angel, there had been no Davidic King for centuries. Herod was a Roman puppet. And his appalling cruelty made him a caricature of the kingship that had been promised to David. So, what the angel announces is that God had not forgotten his promise. But is also a warning that we should not pin our hopes on worldly rulers and political systems to solve our problems. Jesus will say in John's Gospel, *my kingdom is not of this world*.

As so often, the Gospel writers find different ways of saying the same thing, delighting in the variety of ways in which the mystery of God-made-flesh can be communicated. While the idea of Jesus as 'Emmanuel' is such a central platform for Matthew's entire gospel, the same idea is communicated to us by Luke. We see this the angelic greeting. Gabriel's salutation appears to echo the prophecy of Zephaniah, '*Rejoice, daughter of Zion, shout Israel... the king of Israel, the Lord is in your midst.*' We remember of course that in Israel's history the tabernacle, and then temple, were signs that God was *in the midst* of his people. But here, '*the Lord is in your midst*' literally means, '*he is in your womb.*' Luke, then, presents *Mary* to us as the Daughter of Zion. *She* becomes the ark of the covenant where the Lord dwells. It is in her God makes a home.

But more than a house, Luke also suggests Mary as a Temple. *The Holy Spirit will come upon you, and the power of the most high will overshadow you...*' The language used here belongs to the language of the Temple. It speaks of God's presence in the sanctuary. It suggests the sacred cloud which – in many parts of the Old testament – was the visible sign of God's presence. It was this cloud that *concealed* the fact that God is dwelling in his house, yet at the same time *points to it*. Mary appears to us as the living tent, in which God chooses to dwell among us in a new way. In the orthodox world, the principal title for Mary is *Theotokos*, the 'God-Bearer', the equivalent of our 'Mother of God.' But yes, Mary is the God-bearer. She bears Jesus; she is the new temple where God dwells. She is the Ark of the Covenant.

Paul, though, reminds the Christians of Corinth that each of them is also a temple of the Spirit. In the New Covenant, he tells us, we 'are God's temple.' We too are called to be God-bearers. And we are all called for ourselves to build a house in which God might dwell, that God might make his home in us. The task of Christian life is to awaken to the presence of God in our midst. Every Christian must be able to say, that we too are made a temple unto the Lord. So many of our ills could be remedied if we took seriously the incredible wonder that God makes his home with us; that we are invested with the immense dignity of being a God-bearer. Not leaving it to others, not imaging ourselves unworthy, saying, 'God could never use me.' God always uses the small, the unremarkable to further his pursue. He raised a shepherd boy to become king. He chose a virgin to be his mother. Let us then, trust the Prince of Peace and ask him to come and take up his abode in each one of us. Let our lives be his house. Amen.