

Chalmers Church – Some of the Sunday service at Home!

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Sunday 21st June 2020 – Prayer (3) – “A prayer of Dedication”

Introduction

Hello and welcome to this podcast. My name is Robin Allison and I am the minister at Cockenzie and Port Seton’s Chalmers Memorial Church.

This podcast is the third in a series of six reflections where we look at bible passages where prayer features prominently.

In our first reflection we thought of the prayer that Jesus taught his followers, a perfect example of prayer to help those who, as the disciples did, wanted to know how to pray.

Last week, we focussed on the Old Testament character of Daniel whose prayer life gets him into terrible trouble when, in defiance of the Kings orders that no one prays to anyone but the King, Daniel promptly goes home and, in full view of the world begins praying – as he had always done – to the one true God. Daniel uses his prayers almost as an act of defiance. His prayers are testimony to his unwillingness to compromise his values and beliefs.

This week, we remain in the Old Testament as we reflect on the story of a prayer uttered to God by King Solomon after he has successfully completed the building of the first great Temple.

It may seem odd in these days, when we cannot even access our own church buildings, to be reflecting on a building but, as we shall soon see, this wonderful passage and prayer has more to tell us about than buildings alone. For Solomon there is so much more at stake here...

But more of that in a moment. For just now, though, shall we pray?

Let us pray...

Opening prayer and Lord’s Prayer

“The LORD is in his holy temple; let all the earth be silent before him” (Habakkuk 2 verse 20)

Lord God... Holy God, wherever your temple may be for us this day, may your presence be known and experienced and, when it is, may we, your people, know silence as we take that presence in.

Knowing that you, a Holy God, are with us just now, brings to us a real sense of joy because we know that in these moments that you can bring transformation to us. That even in the limits and confines of our own homes that something of the majesty and holiness of God enters into our lives.

So, as we worship you this day, may we sense you with us.

Make us aware of you being with us so that we might settle and allow this time of worship to refresh our souls.

We confess, our loving Father, that we have allowed our anxieties to prevent us from knowing you as we would want to know you.

We crowd our timetables out with activity.

We fill our minds with endless thoughts and complicated thinking patterns.

We question our abilities and, through doing so, question your ability to help us be the people you would want us to be.

So, in the silence of these moments, help us to pause, to allow the God of Heaven and earth to come into the Temple in which we dwell this day and there to find peace, forgiveness and renewal for our lives.

And so, hear us as we bring these our prayers to you in the name of Jesus Christ, our Lord and Saviour as we say:

Our Father

who art in heaven

Hallowed be thy name

Thy kingdom come

Thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven.

Give us this day our daily bread

And forgive us our debts as we forgive our debtors

And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil

For thine is the kingdom, and the power

and the glory, for ever, Amen

Bible Reading – 1st Kings chapter 8 verses 22 to 30 and 41 to 43

Our reading today is part of a much longer chapter in which King Solomon, the son of King David, celebrates the successful completion of the building of the Temple. If you've a chance, it is worth reading through the whole of 1st Kings chapter 8 from where our reading is taken but today, we simply focus on verses 22 to 30 and verses 41 to 43 of 1st Kings chapter 8.

Let's listen for God's word to us...

22 Then Solomon stood before the altar of the Lord in front of the whole assembly of Israel, spread out his hands towards heaven 23 and said:

'Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven above or on earth below – you who keep your covenant of love with your servants who continue wholeheartedly in your way. 24 You have kept your promise to your servant David my father; with your mouth you have promised and with your hand you have fulfilled it – as it is today.

25 'Now Lord, the God of Israel, keep for your servant David my father the promises you made to him when you said, "You shall never fail to have a successor to sit before me on the throne of Israel, if only your descendants are careful in all they do to walk before me faithfully as you have done." 26 And now, God of Israel, let your word that you promised your servant David my father come true.

27 'But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built! 28 Yet give attention to your servant's prayer and his plea for mercy, Lord my God. Hear the cry and the prayer that your servant is praying in

your presence this day. 29 May your eyes be open towards this temple night and day, this place of which you said, "My Name shall be there," so that you will hear the prayer your servant prays towards this place. 30 Hear the supplication of your servant and of your people Israel when they pray towards this place. Hear from heaven, your dwelling place, and when you hear, forgive.

And now at verse 41 we read...

41 'As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name – 42 for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your outstretched arm – when they come and pray towards this temple, 43 then hear from heaven, your dwelling-place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.

Amen and may God add his blessing to this reading of his Holy Word and to his name be the praise and the glory.

Reflection

Ok – I know that I said a few moments ago that our thoughts this morning were, at least partially, about a building. And they are... at least, as I say, partially. The truth of the matter is that our story today really begins, not with a building, but rather with a tent... a tent in which was placed, by King David, the Ark of the Covenant.

What's the Ark of the Covenant?

Well, to answer that we need to go back to the story of Moses ascending Mount Sinai to collect the stone tablets on which God has inscribed the words of the Ten Commandments. Touched by the very hand of God, these stone tablets became of immense significance to the people of Israel. Was there anything more special than that which came from the very hand of God?

So, if you have something that special then you need something to place them in. And that something has to be special too, hence God's instructions at Exodus chapter 25 that a special container be constructed in which was to be placed these stone tablets.

The container itself, we are told was made of Acacia wood overlaid with the finest Gold. Carried on poles, which were held by gold rings, this box – known as the Ark of the Covenant – pretty much goes wherever the people of Israel goes, even in their wilderness wanderings. After all, in that box is everything that sits at the heart of God's relationship to them, as well as everything God expects of them in terms of their behaviour towards him and each other.

Now, over the centuries before this – to paint a picture with a big brush – this so called "Ark of the Covenant" – has been a prized object of fascination to more than just the people of Israel.

Indeed, in a great battle at a place called Aphek – recounted to us in 1st Samuel chapter 4 – the Israelite army thinks that bringing the Ark of the Covenant onto the battlefield will give them greater strength against the might of the Philistine Army. They were, of course, wrong, and the Ark is removed from them by the Philistines who proceed to parade it around all sorts of places... The only problem that the Philistines found with it, however, was that the Ark did not, as it were, respond to their bidding. Wherever they took it, bad things had a habit of happening.

So, eventually, the Ark makes it way back to the people of Israel and, in time, into the hands of King David who had always harboured this great aspiration that one day he'd have a Temple built in which he would place this magnificent box.

The only problem with that, however, is that by the time David is getting his plans in order that he has well and truly blotted his copy book with God. Ultimately, God decrees that it would be Solomon, David's son, who would build the Temple which is why, to get back to that tent I mentioned a moment ago that, until Solomon has the Temple built, that the Ark would live in a tent... in the open where it was guarded by a contingent of soldiers and holy people who were the only ones allowed to go near it and, only then, on very special occasions.

So, as our passage from 1st Kings chapter 8 opens today, we can see why it is that Solomon is so excited that his great building project had come to pass.

Indeed, if you've ever been involved in building something new – however modest or however grand – you'll know just how much effort it involves as well as that feeling of stress leaving you that comes when the builder finally hands over the keys!

In a previous church where I was minister that was the very experience that myself and the small planning team felt when we took possession of the keys for a new church hall. It had taken ages – between 4 and 5 years – to get from initial thoughts and plans to seeing the new hall in physical reality. In fact, the quickest part of the project was the construction phase itself.

It is hard to describe what it felt like to have seen the old hall that was there beforehand lying in piles of rubble... We were now passed the stage of no return. You cannot rebuild that which lies in shattered stone. The only assurance we had to go on was the affirmation by the man in the digger that knocked down the old building into multiple pieces, that the old hall was riddled with wet and dry rot...! *"Could've blown the place down with a feather"*, he uttered. Quietly, inside, we rejoiced at his words which were a final answer to those who said that there was nothing wrong with the old place! Naughty us!

I digress, I know, but that same feeling as we felt then isn't just reserved for new buildings, is it?

If you've ever driven a new car back home for the first time there is always that odd sense of newness that goes with it... and that sense of wondering if the neighbours spotted the shiny wheels and sparkling windows – about the last time the car will ever look like that again, at least not once you've been shopping a few times or driven on a murky day!

And new parents feel the same too, don't they? Leaving that hospital maternity ward with this bundle of new life, filled with overwhelming love for this little package of dependent humanity in the car seat whilst, at the same time, filled with that sense of awe – is this really ours? No... go on... pull the other leg... it's got bells on it!

So, there is Solomon standing at the door to his new Temple... a grand looking place... nothing like that old tattered tent... a building made of majestic stone... laced with Gold and precious jewels... filled with the finest cedar wood... just the sort of place that would befit something as special as the Ark of the Covenant.

Indeed, in the section just before our reading we are told that as the Ark enters the Temple, that the place starts to fill with cloud...

Now, where else had that happened? Ahh... yes... up at the top of Mount Sinai... there had been cloud there too... and where there was cloud, there God was to be found.

Solomon has made his opening speech already. He tells the story of how his father, David, had wanted to build this magnificent edifice but how the Lord had decreed that it would be he – that is Solomon – who would do that. God, he said, had kept his promises. After all, here

they were in that cloud filled place... job done... the keys handed over – even though it too, like all big construction jobs – had taken a bit longer than expected.

Sometimes that makes the handing over of the keys that bit sweeter, doesn't it...? To feel that sense of having got there at last... somehow...!

But the day of its opening was not just about speeches. They had hired no celebrity to cut the ribbon...

No, instead, Solomon begins in prayer...

At verse 22 of our reading we are told that Solomon holds his hands up towards heaven and his first words are not, *"thank you God for architects, builders and those who stumped up the money to build this place"* – even if that might have been an understandable opening statement.

No, instead Solomon seems to backtrack on the magnificence of what has been achieved so that he can simply acknowledge, as he puts it at verse 23, *"Lord, the God of Israel, there is no God like you in heaven or on earth below"*

As one commentator points out there are even echoes here of the prayer that Jesus taught his disciples to pray – *"Our Father, who art in heaven... hallowed by thy name"*.

It's a powerful reminder that prayer truly starts at the point where the presence of God is fully acknowledged.

God at the beginning... God at the middle... and God at the end of every prayer.

Hear too what Solomon says at verse 27 of 1st Kings chapter 8, *"But will God really dwell on earth? The heavens, even the highest heaven, cannot contain you, how much less this temple I have built!"*

This is no false modesty... Here is not a false sense of humility...

Solomon really means what he says. They might all be collectively swooning at what they see.

Their heart rate might be just a little faster than normal. And their eyes might even had shed even a modest tear or two.

Solomon really means it. Even this place isn't big enough for God! And it is as well that they remember that now so, that every time they walk through the door... process... sing in it...lift up holy hands in prayers, that they should remind themselves – *"yes – we like this place... we love this place but the God whom we worship... well, he is still bigger than this place... much bigger"*

This is what Solomon really wanted the people to remember when they saw the Temple.

His prayer of dedication places the very work of their hands back into the hands of God.

May this place, he prays as our reading concludes, be the place where those both near and far... both the ones that agree with us and don't agree with us... who live like us and who don't live like us – may this place be where people encounter God.

Ok – so we are not, as you listen to or read these words, in our own little temples today. But I still reckon we can say those words that Solomon spoke about the homes in which we eat and sleep and relax which have become, for us, God's special dwelling place in these days so long as we, like Solomon, put God first... middle... and last, in the prayers that we make.

Let us pray.

Closing Prayer

Our loving God, who is greater even than the finest of temples or the most opulent of grand cathedrals, we come to you this day to thank you that in limited spaces that you can be known... the God of heaven and earth found in the temples and cathedrals and even homes of our world.

God of living rooms and studies... Lord of the Kitchen and dining rooms... God of the garden and summer house... God of the conservatory and the quiet path we walk on in these days, help us, your people, to recognise the many ways in which we see you at work in your world in these days.

Give to us, your people... your church, the eyes to see the variety of ways that you work in and amongst your people so that we might continue to love the places that we usually worship in but recognise too that these places do not define you, nor pin you down.

Help us to hold on to that message at a time when we miss the familiarity of our places of worship and, come that day when we shall once again be back in those places, help us not to forget what it was like in these days to meet you as we do today.

We thank you that when Solomon dedicated his magnificent temple that he did not name it after himself or bring glory to his own name but, instead, handed over the work of many hands into the hands of God.

May we too hand over to you the work of our hands as well as the cares of our hearts this day.

Bless and be with all whose cares weigh heavily with them – the ill, the lonely, those who grieve and those who are facing struggles.

Help us, and them, to hand over to you the cares and concerns of daily living through your reassurance that you are bigger than the physical and metaphorical walls that we build.

And bless again the human hands to whom we, in our moments of need, ask to care for us.

Hear us now as we bring these our prayers to you in Jesus' name, Amen.

Benediction

As we draw this of worship to a close may we continue to put God at the beginning, God in the Middle and God at the end of our prayers and so may we feel the presence of God not just in temple or church, but in our own homes where we worship now.

And may the blessing of almighty God – Father, Son and Holy Spirit – bless and be with you this day and forevermore, Amen.