

## Freedom from building, freedom for building

A sermon preached by Trevor on Sunday 14<sup>th</sup> April 2019

Text: Exodus 35.30-36.1; 40.35-38

As someone who has spent an unhealthy portion of my life immersed in libraries, lecture theatres and behind my writing desk, I've often hankered after a more practical, hands-on vocation – doing something that would leave in its wake some identifiable, finished, material product that I and others could stand back and look at and appreciate, if not for its beauty and the evidence of immaculate skill and frustrated creative genius, then at least for being useful and good enough. Maybe all of us have a builder buried somewhere deep inside us! After all, the first thing we learn about God in the Bible is that he enjoys making things, and then stands back to enjoy what he has made. And, when God becomes a human being, let's not forget that the lost decades between his childhood and the gospel stories were spent in workshops and on building sites, working as an apprentice and then no doubt a master carpenter in his dad's firm. So, making stuff, being creative, getting your hands dirty by getting to grips constructively with the world's raw materials – this seems to be in God's blood, and as those made in God's image I think it's in our blood too, even though it may be fairly well hidden in some of us. In fact, despite the fact that I enjoy tinkering at a workbench in the shed, the truth is I'm still much more comfortable and more adept with a flatpack and Allen key from IKEA, and a set of those impossible to interpret instructions.

The message of the Bible, though, and the message of this morning's sermon, is that God calls us, as Christians, to be involved in the building trade – to be *builders* of sorts; to be involved *with God*, in fact, getting our hands dirty in a building project which is not yet finished, and which is unmistakably *God's* project, but in which we have a definite part to play. Even those of us blessed with two left

hands, and whose calling in life definitely seems to be as far away from power-tools and the material well-being of things as humanly possible.

In this morning's readings from Exodus we find God calling the Israelites to be builders – to knuckle down and pool their material and human resources, and build a tabernacle – in effect a fancy tent which would be a visible and material focus for God's own presence with his people, a 'place' where they could meet with God and know that God dwelt among them. There's a bit of an irony about this, of course, because as those of you who have been following this series of sermons for Lent will recall, the story of Israel's life with God began when they were slaves in Egypt, and what were they doing as slaves? They were *building*!! Building great cities, and civic infrastructure for Pharaoh; perhaps even building some of those fancy pyramids that the very word 'Egypt' conjures up in our mind's eye today, on which a whole tourist industry is based, both in north Africa, and in the dubiously plundered treasures claimed and displayed by museums and galleries rather closer to home for the last century or so. And so we are confronted with the irony that no sooner has Israel been set free by God *from* building (as Pharaoh's slave labour force on the building sites of Egypt), no sooner has she escaped across the red sea and caught her breath and began to get her bearings in the wilderness around Mt Sinai, than Israel discovers that what she has been set free *for* is not a life of leisure and luxury beside the swimming pool with a pina colada, but one that will also involve (yes, you guessed it) building! Building now, though, not for Pharaoh and the designs of his civil engineering department, but for God, and in accordance with God's really quite detailed designs.

Israel, that is to say, is set free *from* building, and set free *for* building. Though the projects involved are as different from one another as it's possible to be. And they learn (and we need to learn with them) that there are sorts of building that will enslave us, and sorts of building that are liberating and through our involvement in

which, even though it be hard work, we find fulfilment and satisfaction and blessing.

\*\*\*\*\*

Let's go back to the tabernacle though, which on the face of it seems both a bit of an odd construction (it's all a bit rickety and impermanent – not really up to the sort of quality work Pharaoh had them doing, immovable, and designed to last forever) and a rather limited project in its way. After all, how long can it take a group of intelligent people to put up a tent? Well, as anyone who has had to do so for the first time will know, you'd think it was easy, but... it can be a challenge! And this particular tent had some special built in features that were going to need a high level of craftsmanship and care to get it right.

But the truth is that the building of the tabernacle, and Israel's involvement in it, was not a project intended to transform a portion of arid desert into an irrigated, air-conditioned Shangri-las for Israel's habitation, or even for God's. It was a *symbol*. A powerful symbol and a vitally important symbol, but a symbol nevertheless. A symbol that spoke of God's character and God's purposes and God's promises – and its relative flimsiness and capacity to be packed up at a moment's notice and thrown on the back of a camel was an important part of the symbolism. To be honest, it's not what you or I would probably have come up with if we thought we were building a dwelling place for God. In fact, it's not what Moses and Aaron and their workforce would have come up with either, if left to their own devices. But they weren't left to their own devices! And that's an important part of the point too. They were under strict instructions, and they followed them, and the result, as we heard earlier, was that this slightly ramshackle, mom and pop, sand and wind-resistant but otherwise relatively basic 2-man/1-God hike tent was exactly what God wanted! It suited God down to the ground,

and God's glory, we are told, covered and filled it. Remarkably, and frankly probably rather scarily, God was no longer to be sought out at the top of the mountain; the cloud and smoke and fire were right here, in the people's midst.

What the tabernacle *symbolizes*, in fact, is precisely God's purpose not just for Israel but for the world and for us – that God should not seem or be remote or hidden from us, but would dwell *with* us, dwell in our very midst, dwell with us in such a way that this being together with us, this coming together of heaven and earth, this union of God's life and the world's life and our life, should not be some vague religious aspiration or hope, but a concrete reality in the world's midst. That is God's purpose in the project of creation itself: that the world should be a place where God and God's creatures can dwell together, a place for God and us to enjoy together, a place fit for God to be with us and we with God; and a place that reverberates with God's presence, that shines with God's presence, where God is all in all, and where the knowledge of God's glory fills the world as the waters cover the sea. God's glory palpable everywhere in creation – the whole world such as to manifest and resonate with and bear witness to and to *share in* God's glory!!

That's why the tabernacle is a *symbol*. Of course, it can't house God! God can't be kept in a tent, or even a cathedral! God is the creator, the maker of heaven and earth, present to all times and places, filling all things and surrounding all things and holding all things in being. But (and it's a very big BUT) the world is *not* fit as a place for God to dwell with us. Not yet. The world does *not* resound with God's presence, but obscures it. It does *not* body forth God's goodness and glory, but for the most part rejects and denies and contradicts it. It does not know God's glory or desire it, but would prefer it to clear off back up the mountain and leave it alone. As a symbol, therefore, what the tabernacle *tells* Israel, what it constantly *reminds* Israel, is that despite all appearances, despite the wider fabric of human

experience and human behaviour, this *is* God's world, even though his presence and his glory remain for now for the most part veiled and unacknowledged by the world. As a symbol, the tabernacle both stakes a claim and seals a promise. As the visible, tangible focus of God's presence with his people, the tabernacle gives Israel a place in the flesh and blood world where she can look and know that what is symbolised here is true everywhere, even though its truth is not yet apparent. This world is God's world, and its destiny lies in God and as the place where God has promised that God's glory will be seen and known and enjoyed forever, whatever may have to happen in the meanwhile.

But it's with that 'in the meanwhile' that Israel's role in building the tabernacle also possesses powerful symbolic force. Because the work of the world becoming and being a place where God's presence and glory are known and enjoyed is not something that God, in God's wisdom, has decided to keep jealously to himself. Building the tabernacle is a concrete material and artistic task for Israel; but much more importantly it is symbolic of their wider calling to build or construct, lives, communities, relationships, institutions which, despite the building regulations and architectural mores of the world they live in, refuse to conform to the way the world currently is or what the world tells them they should build, or are and should be and become. And, when they show up with their slightly scruffy looking portable shrine and put it up in contravention of local by-laws, and to the disgust of the local neighbourhood watch scheme (because what speaks of God is always going to offend the values of the world and call into question its priorities and interfere with its plans and affect property prices), Israel too is staking a claim for God, and proclaiming God's promise, and nailing her colours to the mast as a people determined to build, wherever she is, a pocket of community which takes no notice of the world's demands, but lives instead in accordance with the character and demands of her God who is *also* the world's God, though the world does not know it and will not hear it.

\*\*\*\*\*

Well, the age of the tabernacle is past. And in an important sense the symbolism of the tabernacle has already been fulfilled, not in such a way as to set it aside, but instead ratcheting it up even more loudly, in Jesus – in whom God’s own Son or Word took flesh and dwelt or ‘tabernacled’ among us as one of his own creatures, and in whom God’s glory was there to be beheld. Jesus is no mere symbol of course. Jesus is the *reality* – God and humankind, heaven and earth woven together, living as one, correlated with one another so that creation itself in the humanity of Jesus finally resonates, reverberates, pulsates with the holiness and the glory of God, and is rendered fit to house God, fit to share in God’s own life. But the coming of Jesus is not the end of the story. It’s the beginning of the end of the story, but the story still has a way to run, and it’s still a story about building, and it’s one in which we Christians are now called onto the building site and have a trowel, or a hammer, or a JCB (I quite fancy a JCB) thrust upon us.

Like Israel, we have been set free from building. Set free, that is to say, from our complicity in the world’s determination to build Babel over and over again, laying its own dubious foundations, erecting its ill-fated scaffolding, installing its dodgy wiring and other services, as it seeks forever to construct itself without reference to who God is, to pretend that God is of no account in the planning or the execution of its skilled designs, to suppose that it has no need of God in order to understand the world, or to quarry and exploit its rich potential, or to make of it the best it can be as far as its human creatures are concerned. We have been set free from our conscription as labourers in all that. Free to resist it. Free to challenge its vision and its values. Free to refuse to play the game according to the world’s rules, or to play the part the world calls us to play in bringing its schemes to effect. But we

have not been set free from building as such. For, like Israel, we are called, commanded in fact, to *build* – to get our hands dirty and break a sweat in the business of constructing something.

We are *not* called to build the kingdom of God, *or* to change the world into a place fit for God's dwelling. Please don't make the mistake of supposing that! That's God's own task and one God has promised to complete in God's own good time. And if we mistake it for *our* task we shall either fall into the trap of tragic hubris, or else experience the sapping of our strength by our inevitable failure to succeed! No – we, like Israel, are called to a more modest (though in itself demanding enough) task: namely, to show up, wherever we are or are called or find ourselves, and put up our scruffy little shack on the street corner, and to *be* and to build *the church*, a place in God's world that *knows* that this is God's world, and that God is present in it, and that knows what the world itself is called to be (but is not yet but will one day be); that knows and proclaims this, and that lives in ways that take no notice of the world's planning restrictions or building regulations or developmental priorities, as instead it builds communities, relationships, lives, that speak first and foremost of who God is, that perform concrete parables of what *the world* is called to be and will be, and that celebrates and gives thanks for the unexpected freedom it has discovered in doing so. It may seem to make no difference. It may seem that no-one is listening or taking any notice, except when what we do treads on the toes of some vested interest or other. We may end up getting crucified for it. That's okay. There's no better time than today, as we stand on the threshold of Holy Week, to remind ourselves that getting crucified rather than changing the world into a better place is actually what is contained in the small-print of our baptismal certificate, even though we may have clicked on 'Accept' without bothering to read it...