

Sermon for Sunday, August 23, 2009, Proper 16, Year B, RCL

Where is God's House?

Where does God live?

Where is God?

In our reading today from 1 Kings, the boy Solomon who we had admired last week for asking for wisdom, rather than fame or riches, is now King Solomon giving one of the longest and most famous speeches in the O.T., known in art and music as "The Dedication of Solomon's Temple." He has spent 7 years building what must have been one of the most magnificent structures of its time. He has brought the Ark of the Covenant that traveled with the nomadic people while they wandered in the wilderness, and placed it in the innermost room. The language of Solomon's hymn of praise rises to lofty heights, saying "But will God indeed dwell on the earth? Even heaven and the highest heaven cannot contain you, much less this house that I have built!" This beautiful language is echoed in today's psalm, "How lovely (How dear to me) is your dwelling, (your dwelling-place) O LORD of hosts"

Actually, Solomon didn't build the Temple; he was not even the General Contractor or Architect. Solomon used harsh taxes and slave labor to build his Temple, not only from the foreigners, but even from the Hebrew tribes. It was from this point forward that what Paul calls "the rulers, ... the authorities" that are aligned with "the cosmic powers of this present darkness" – what we might call a kind of bureaucratic, institutional power, supplants the kind of personal, intimate relationship Abraham had with Yahweh. Not so wise, after all ... We have the same old story, like the youngest, disrespected daughter becoming the princess Cinderella, and then (if you know the original Grimm Fairy Tales) the entrenched autocrat makes her step-sisters dance to their deaths in hot iron boots. Or think of your favorite little coffee shop that becomes a mediocre restaurant when it achieves "success".

Some historians compare Solomon to Constantine, who is credited with turning the Roman Empire from the institution that fed Christians to the lions to the Christians that conquered "in this sign." When I was young, before the Surgeon General's Report on Smoking, my dad smoked Pall Mall cigarettes. Curiosity about the lettering on the package is how I came to learn that the "IHS" that we see on the cross means "In this Sign". So what is that sign of the

cross done for the Prince of Peace? As Gandhi once quipped, "The only people on earth who do not see Christ and His teachings as nonviolent are Christians."

Stretching metaphors even further, we have Paul, the "ambassador in chains" getting inspiration from the soldier's kit of his captors. He is turning the conventional understanding of military might upside-down, in a way that speaks to soldiers or martyrs. What is our stance if the enemy is not blood and flesh, but is all of the ways that institutions can gnaw at our humanity. Eat **this** bread, drink **this** blood. All of Paul's examples are defensive, with one exception – the offensive weapon is that stubby blade for close combat, "the sword of the Spirit, which is the word of God."

And *who* is the Word of God? As Peter says in the Gospel, "Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." It is not just the words Jesus has spoken with his mouth that are "spirit and life"; Jesus **is** The Word of eternal life incarnate. The Word that "speaks truth to power", the Word that with a "still, small voice" shakes the foundations of temples and totalitarianism.

Today is the 4th Sunday in a row (and the only time in the liturgical calendar) in which the Gospels again and again repeat the Eucharist language about the bread and the wine, the body and the blood. Jesus is being "difficult" or in the Greek, "SKANDALON / scandalous" because he is saying, even in the synagogue, that if we want to abide with God, if we want to be in God's dwelling place, if we want to find out God's address and zip code, we have got to completely lose the "where" in our thinking! It's not about the "where" -- it's not about the building or the mountain top, the sanctuary or the courtyard, standing or sitting, walking on water or taking the escalator to heaven.

Being with Christ and In Christ – in communion with one another – means losing (if only for a moment) a one-way space-time continuum perspective for a knowing of God that is closer than the nutrients in our blood cells, than the yeast rising in the bread. In the early years of Christianity, one of the most popular images of Jesus was the feeding of the multitude. Long before Christians portrayed Christ crucified, they showed him breaking bread.

And at the very same time, it *is* about particular relationships, particular places in human history, in choices that can include turning our backs on our deepest call or knowing the Holy One of God.

"Do you also wish to go away?"

Where will we go?