

SERMON: 2018/08/26 (14th Sunday aft. Pentecost, Yr. B - Track 1) - *1 Kings* 8:1,6,10-11,22-30,41-43 & *John* 6:56-69

[Invite children to the front.]

Today, we hear Jesus admitting something that might surprise you - by its frankness [looking at the adults]:

He reassures us that some of what he tells us to believe and do 'is difficult'.

Like, for instance, "loving your neighbour as yourself."

This is *really* hard.

Have you ever tried it?

[Wait for response.]

I have.

I *do*.

But I can never keep it up for long.

Sometimes I think I'm doing a good job of it - of being kind and thoughtful - and then I open my eyes and realise it's time to get up and have my breakfast.

But the hardest thing of all, perhaps, is just believing.

It's trusting that Jesus is who the Bible says He is.

It's having faith that He really did take away all my sins on the Cross, and I no longer need to fear death.

And, actually, we see this this morning, Jesus says that it is impossible.

Like a blindfolded person trying to find true north.

Even with a compass in their hand.

[Game: ask for a volunteer and put a blindfold on them. Ask them to point to north. If/when they struggle, hand them a compass. If anyone gets it right, point out that it is only by luck.]

(It's no help.)

We are *incapable*.

"'For this reason', He tells us, '...no one can come to [love and follow Jesus] *unless* it is granted by [God] the Father.'"

That *spiritual* side of us, that *moral* side of us which is drawn to Him (and the salvation He alone offers) is a gift from the Holy Spirit in Heaven.

Shall we thank Him for it?

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

In your Bible-readings insert, you can see that, for the sake of expediency - for brevity, our Old Testament reading has been "chopped" up a little this morning, and certainly some of the detail that has been excised is rather trivial, but I just want to read you the first verse again along with those (missing ones) that follow to highlight some repetition, which I think is interesting:

Okay, they go like this - and I am going to paraphrase just a smidge: 'Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before [him] in Jerusalem, to bring *up* the ark of the covenant of the Lord *out* of the city of David, which is Zion. All the people [did so] at the festival in the month [of] Ethanim, which is the seventh month [of the year - about October in our calendar]. And all the elders of Israel came, and the priests carried the ark. So they brought *up* the ark of the Lord, the tent of meeting, and all the holy vessels that were in the tent; the priests and the Levites brought them *up*.'

The Ark of the covenant, then - that special box of solid gold "housing" the Ten Commandments [see: Ex. 25:10-16] - having crossed *thousands* of miles of open desert (following the "Exodus"), paraded around Jericho [Jos. 6:8ff.], then left to languish for hundreds of years at Bethel [Jdgs. 20:26-27], suddenly transferred to Shiloh [1 Sam. 4:4], stolen by the Philistines [1 Sam. 4:11f.], re-captured by David and taken to his conquest of Jerusalem, the hill-fort of the Jebusites on the mountain of Zion [Jos. 15:63a] - was *once more* on the move, and, apparently, it was heading (*again*) in a direction of *increasing* altitude: it went *uphill* from the young capital of the Israelite empire [2 Sam. 5:6-9], to another location *beyond* its traditional walls.

And this is significant.

The Ark was being transferred to *elevate* it above the noise, and smells and general hubbub of the city and above *even* the pomp and pretty elegance of the palace, to a *higher* situation of greater visibility.

Why?

The idea was to *accentuate* its peculiarity, its importance.

And its destination was, of course, the brand new Temple that Solomon had just

completed, (at enormous expense).

To get a clearer picture of all this, look, with me, at the topographical map on the reverse of your bulletin:

Here you can see that "the city of David" - *Zion* - was quite a dense, quaint, little place on a (narrow) "spur," a promontory, *jutting* out from a huge rocky mass behind, to the north and west.

And the new site was a *taller* peak on that same formation called, "Moriah:" [2 Chron. 3:1].

Now, if, like me, you're something of a *Lord of the Rings* geek, that name should be loudly ringing bells right now as the mines through which the "Fellowship" passes" on their way to the East and where Gandalf dies and is resurrected.

Is this a coincidence? Likely not: Tolkien was a 'devout' Roman Catholic, and 'his presuppositions, patterns, symbols, and themes parallel those of the Bible'; he 'relied' on it heavily.[n.1]

But, *much* more significant (for all people), is that "Moriah" is also, *roughly*, the place where Abraham had begun to sacrifice his son and heir, Isaac: [Gen. 22:2a].

To situate the Ark here - to make *this* mountaintop the centre of the nation - was absolutely *pregnant-to-bursting* with meaning and message and gravitas.

In the intervening years, during the enslavement of the Israelites in Egypt, it had been a Canaanite farm producing cereals, and the exact spot where the Temple was constructed was the old "threshing floor" - so already nice and level ground of hard, compacted earth.

Perfect for building *up* from.

David, in his enthusiasm, purchased the property,[2 Sam. 24:24] but was forestalled in his plans by God Himself:

He sent the king a prophet - Nathan - who said, "'Thus says the Lord: 'Are you the one to build me a house to live in? I have not lived in a house since the day I brought up the people of Israel from Egypt to this day, but I have been moving about in a tent and a tabernacle. ...[D]id I ever speak a word with any of the tribal leaders of Israel, whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, saying, "Why have you not built me a house of cedar?"...'"'[7:5b-7]

And you know what?

This ambivalence about the Temple (and the sacrificial system) never entirely disappears from the Scriptures.

As with the monarchy [see: 1 Sam. 8:20], it was patterned after architecture and

practices borrowed from surrounding, non-believing *pagan* nations - it was built by a *Tyrian* architect (from Lebanon) [1 Kgs. 7:13f.] using a popular Mediterranean schematic that 'followed Phoenician models'.[n.2]

I myself saw a version in the deserts of Sudan(!) (in northern Africa) [called "Naqa"]: in one-hundred-and-twenty-degree-heat, many miles from the nearest highway (or A.C.!), in a flat, almost Martian-like landscape of hard, red rock. And the similarity was uncanny - the overall, 'cubical-like' silhouette;[n.3] the linear, 'multi-room' floor-plan, one behind the other, three-in-a-row, of increasing holiness from the entrance;[n.4] the flat roof supported by columns;[n.5] and an exterior, stepped furnace-altar (for burning carcasses) set off to one side.[n.6] Surely, *this was no coincidence!*

Both would have been sumptuously decorated too.

(Although *here*, Solomon's iteration departs, somewhat, from the prevailing convention.

In Sudan, the local deities - some sporting animal heads, like an inverted centaur - are depicted on the walls, carved in that slightly raised, angular, "2D," everything-only-in-profile style we associate with (ancient) Egypt.[n.7]

But our king, a descendant of "Adam," would never dare to go so far as to attempt to give the Creator Himself a body, and in His place 'carved [only] cherubim on the walls',[2 Chron. 3:7] and into the exposed beams went 'carvings of gourds and open flowers'[1 Kgs. 6:18] as well as 'palm trees'.[v.32 & 35]

And as such it was *magnificent(!)*, but very typical.

So, why?

Given how unique and transformative Jewish *monotheism* was - *deviant*, even - why was the Temple's design so ordinary?

Because, *I conjecture*, Solomon wanted it to be recognisable to "foreigners."

(A word repeated in verses 41, 42 and 43 [of 1 Kgs.] .)

He wanted others *not* familiar with the Faith to see it and know, *immediately*, that this was a *sacred* place, being similar to the religious forms with which they were already familiar.

Thus, we hear him say, '...so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you'.

*This* is its purpose; to be a beacon; a lighthouse [ref. Mt. 5:14]; 'a cosmic navel'.[n.8]

But God's concern is that this marvellous symbol could be - or could become - incongruous with the *internal* life of the nation.

That behind this wonderful "tourist attraction" there would be an unholy, *disappointing* void, an emptiness; that the effort and expense invested in making the Temple was a way for Solomon and his people to congratulate themselves

about *appearing* to have properly ordered priorities *whilst* actually avoiding a far more important task - that of - *daily* - building lives of holiness, of quiet, private faithfulness.

For the LORD, you see, it's not about *looking* "the part;" it's about *being* "the part."

And, in the *final* analysis - despite the wonderful Temple he built, and how he 'excelled' in enlarging his father's kingdom [1 Kgs. 10:23] - Solomon 'failed'.<sup>[n.9]</sup> His story, ultimately, 'is more of a tragedy' than it is anything else; derailed by, in particular, his libido: [11:1-5].

Just read through, later, to the end of chapter 11; and what you'll find there is that he allowed his lust to undermine the foundations of the God-pleasing life he should have constructed, and he failed *badly*.<sup>[n.10]</sup>

As have *those* Pennsylvanian priests we've heard about in the News recently. *Outwardly*, they, probably, seemed like holy men: they wore, I'm sure, "the uniform" - the black shirt and the white collar, the cassock, and so on. That they habitually carried a prayer-book and a Bible. That they could be seen at their local hospitals consoling the sick, etcetera, etcetera.<sup>[n.11]</sup>

But, behind closed doors, out of the view of the public, they were doing something truly monstrous; of the Devil.

And so, in the most dreadful fashion, forgot that *seeming* to be a godly person will count for *nothing* when Jesus returns.

This is the heart of our Redeemer's criticism of the (Galilean) pharisees, that, and I quote, 'they do not practice what they teach. ...[and] do all their deeds [merely] to be seen by others': [Mt. 23:3-5].

But, on the last day, observes Saint Paul, '[He] will repay according to each one's deeds: [and] to those who...patiently [do] good..., [H]e will give eternal life'.<sup>[Rom. 2:6]</sup>

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: Walton, Christina Ganong (2007), 'Bible', in Drout, Michael D. C. (Ed.), *J. R. R. Tolkien Encyclopedia: Scholarship and Critical Assessment*, Oxon., U. K.; New York, N. Y.: Routledge (Taylor & Francis Group), pp. 62-64.
2. Bright, John (2000), *A History of Israel*, Fourth Edition, London, U. K.; Louisville, K. Y.: Westminster John Knox Press, 218.

3. Garber, Paul Leslie (February 1951), 'Reconstructing Solomon's Temple', *The Biblical Archaeologist*, Volume 14, No. 1, pp. 1-24, 4.
4. See: Rocheleau, Caroline Michelle (2008), *Amun Temples in Nubia: A Typological Study of New Kingdom, Napatan and Meroitic Temples (B. A. R. International Series 1850)*, Oxford: Archaeopress, 78. Or, alternatively, my holiday "snaps!"
5. Török, László (2002), *The Image of the Ordered World in Ancient Nubian Art: The Construction of the Kuskite Mind (800 B. C. - 300 A. D.)*, Leiden, The Netherlands; Boston, M. A.: Brill, 227-228.
6. Garber (1951), 4-5.
7. Török (2002), 228-230.
8. Levenson, Jon D. (July 1984), 'The Temple and the World', *The Journal of Religion*, Volume 64, No. 3, pp. 275-298, 283.
9. Ryken, Philip Graham (2011), *King Solomon: The Temptations of Money, Sex, and Power*, Wheaton, I. L.: Crossway, 167, 177.
10. *Ibid.*, 232.
11. See, for example: <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/18/us/pennsylvania-church-abuse-report.html>