

Building God's house

We went to the Ramesses: The Gold of the Pharaoh's exhibition at the Australian Museum last week. It is a great exhibition, with ancient Egyptian artefacts (including such bizarre things as a mummified cat!), reconstructions, video clips and models of various key sites in Egypt.

The Ramesses of the title is Ramesses II, also called Ramesses the Great. He was an impressive person – he's regarded as the greatest, most celebrated, and most powerful pharaoh of the New Kingdom, which itself was the most successful and powerful period of ancient Egypt. He lived for about 90 years, reigned for nearly 67 years. He had seven consorts – with Nefertari being the most famous - and his favourite - and he had between 88 and 103 children.

He built monuments to himself and Nefertari, he built palaces for himself and his consorts, and he built temples.

He established a new capital, Pi-Ramesses at Qantir in the Nile delta, complete with docks and storehouses and yet more palaces and temples and monuments.

One of the things that struck me at the exhibition was the description of how the buildings of Pi-Ramesses were constructed. Mostly, the buildings, including the palaces, were made of mud brick – which was the common building material of ancient Egypt – but the temples were made of stone.

The Nile delta floods, of course, and mud brick buildings are slowly eroded by the heat, the floods and the winds. So even the grandest of Ramesses palaces would need to be repaired or rebuilt in his lifetime – and they certainly haven't lasted the 3,200 years since he died.

But the temples stood the test of time. The stone stood up to the test of time. The years of heat and flood and wind.

As important and powerful and grand as the Egyptians held their Pharaohs to be, they held their gods to be more important, more powerful and more grand. The gods deserved buildings of stone, not of mud brick.

Of course, the ancient Egyptians believed that a suitably prepared Pharaoh could transition from mortal to God... and they held that Ramesses had made that transition - so we do have standing stone temples and monuments to Ramesses the Great and Nefertari today.

Long before Ramesses, the Egyptians had built other monuments from stone, of course. The pyramids and the great sphinx had been built and carved from rock – and they were already more than a thousand years old by the time of Ramesses.

In fact, the Great Pyramid of Giza became the tallest structure in the world when it was constructed in the 26th century BC. And it would remain the tallest structure in the world until AD1311 when Lincoln Cathedral in England was completed. Just as the ancient Egyptians honoured their gods with stone temples, so Christians built churches and cathedrals to honour God.

And just like the ancient temples, the churches and cathedrals were built of stone – they were built to last.

For the trivia buffs - the title of the tallest structure was passed from cathedral to cathedral for many years – Lincoln, St Mary's in Stralsund Germany, Beauvais and Strasbourg Cathedrals in France, St Nikolai in Hamburg, Notre Dame in France and Cologne Cathedral in Germany. The reign of the cathedrals as the tallest structures in the world lasted from 1311 until 1884, when the Washington

Monument briefly held the title, until it was trumped by the Eiffel Tower in 1881. In the 1930s the Chrysler building, and then the Empire State building, ushered in the age of the modern skyscrapers.

But for five hundred years, the tallest, most impressive buildings the world had ever seen, had been built to honour God. To the glory of God. Cynically, some may say it was to the glory of the church, but I know for many people, those stone buildings, with their high ceilings, their stained-glass windows and their booming organs and choirs, really give them a sense of God's power – and God's presence in the world.

We might acknowledge that we can worship God anywhere, and in many different ways, but when we establish a place for formal worship, we want to make it a good place. A worthy place. We want people to be comfortable and welcomed. We want them to see what's important to us as followers of Jesus. We want a place where people can feel close to God. We want the place where we worship to last. Indeed, this building was built for worship 51 years ago, and it is still a great place for worship today, and we can hope it can be used for worship to honour God for the next 51 years and beyond.

Of course, sometimes our priorities go astray. We can focus on the building. On making it better and grander. But the church is not the building – it is the body of Christ. And sometimes, even perhaps often, the best thing we can do as the body of Christ is not to build monuments. Modern church buildings tend not to be built to the same plan as old church buildings. They are no longer generally halls with fixed seating – but now (as is the case with this building) they're flexible worship spaces.

But we still like to have our sacred spaces. We still like to honour God with our buildings. Oddly we find ourselves living in nicer and nicer homes... and at the same time our church buildings are more and more utilitarian.

King David certainly had that sense. In our reading from the second book of Samuel we heard that:

After the king was settled in his palace and the Lord had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, "Here I am, living in a house of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent." (2 Samuel 7:1-2)

The tent that David speaks of was the tabernacle, the portable earthly dwelling place of God established by the Israelites from the Exodus until the conquest of Canaan. Moses had been instructed by God at Mount Sinai to construct and transport the tabernacle with the Israelites on their journey through the wilderness and their subsequent conquest of the Promised Land. As tents go, it was a very grand affair, but it was still a tent.

Things has been going well for David. Enemies defeated. The capital established. And David was living in a palace of cedar. It didn't seem right that God was still dwelling in the tabernacle.

Let's build a temple.

The prophet Nathan supported David, and assured the king that God was with him. (7:3).

To build a temple for God was a good idea. But a 'good idea' is not the same as being 'God's idea'.

While God's ideas never fail, our good ideas sometimes do, and sometimes we're not entirely honest about why we want to carry out our 'good ideas'. Our motives for doing things are often mixed motives. Remember when the people of Israel wanted a king to rule over them, because things didn't seem to have always gone well without a king (Judges 21:25)? They wanted to "be like the nations" around them (1 Samuel 8:19-20) - not a good motive for the people of God! After all, God had gone to considerable effort to set them apart from all the nations around them.

In the chapter before today's reading, David brought together all the able young men of Israel—thirty thousand. He and all his men went to Baalah in Judah to bring up from there the Ark of the Covenant (2 Sam 6:1-2). It was a good idea... but David didn't consult God – or the prophet Nathan – on whether it was a good idea. It seems to have been a spontaneous thing, and a bit disorganised, and the move failed. Dramatically – in fact it cost a man his life.

Three months later, the move was again attempted, but the second time was done at God's command and in accordance with God's instruction. That time, it was a success:

Verse 17 of chapter 6 tells us *“They brought the ark of the Lord and set it in its place inside the tent that David had pitched for it, and David sacrificed burnt offerings and fellowship offerings before the Lord.”*

The ark of the Lord was inside the tent that David had pitched for it. Which brings us back neatly to God dwelling in the tent, while David was dwelling in a palace. So David sought to rectify that: Let's build a temple!

Good idea! The other nations would have had temples for their gods, the Egyptians certainly did, so doesn't God deserve one to?

Nathan agreed. It's a good idea: Go for it!

I can't help but wonder if Nathan thought it would be pretty cool to be the prophet who dedicated God's temple...

It was God himself who stopped the plan for David to build the temple. God told Nathan that it wasn't necessary, and that he hadn't asked for it. God told Nathan to tell David that God cannot be contained in a building (2 Samuel 7:6-7), and since the time of the Exodus God had been content to dwell in the tabernacle and over that time, God moved with all the Israelites.

God then tells David, through Nathan, all that God had done for him and what God would do for him: He'd taken David from the pasture where he'd been tending a flock, and had appointed him ruler over Israel. God had been with David wherever he'd gone, and had defeated all his enemies. And now God promised to make David's name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth. And promised to provide a place for his people - a home of their own where they would and no longer be disturbed.

And finally God says through Nathan:

“The Lord declares to you that the Lord himself will establish a house for you: Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.”

A temple was a good idea, but the timing was not right. David's priorities were not right. Ultimately, it would be David's son Solomon's, task to build the temple (2 Samuel 7:12-13, 1 Chronicles 22:6-10).

But there's more to this prophecy than the building of the stone temple in Jerusalem. God promised David that his house and kingdom will endure forever... It might last longer than a mud brick palace, but even a stone temple will not last *forever*. We can know that the ultimate fulfilment of that prophecy is not in a building, but in a person. In Jesus. But something will last forever – as we heard in our gospel reading today, the angel announced to Mary (Luke 1:31-33):

You will conceive and give birth to a son, and you are to call him Jesus. He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give him the throne of his father David, and he will reign over Jacob's descendants forever; his kingdom will never end.”

And as Paul wrote to the Ephesians (2:19-22):

Consequently, you are no longer foreigners and strangers, but fellow citizens with God's people and also members of his household, built on the foundation of the apostles and prophets, with Christ Jesus himself as the chief cornerstone. In him the whole building is joined together and rises to become a holy temple in the Lord. And in him you too are being built together to become a dwelling in which God lives by his Spirit.

God explained through Nathan that God's presence would not and could not to be confined to a temple, however fine or grand that temple might have been. Neither are the people of God to be defined by church organisations and church buildings in our own day.

The church is the temple. Not the building. Not the people. But the body of Christ.

The church is the temple – God's dwelling place amongst people. God's dwelling place amongst us.

David's plan to build a temple for God had been stopped, and it was ultimately his Solomon who would build the temple in Jerusalem, and it would be God who build the "house" (dynasty) of David.

Even during the years of exile, even when there was no apparent king in Israel, the people held on to the hope of the one who would come to re-establish David's kingdom. The shoot of the stump of Jesse that the prophet Isaiah had spoken of (Isaiah 11:1). As we sing in the carol "To you in David's town this day is born of David's line a Saviour, who is Christ the Lord; (and this shall be the sign)".

We can look around this building and we see a wonderful space where people have worshipped for 51 years, and we see things that point to God – to the table to which all are invited, the stained glass windows which speak to the light of the Lord, to the baptism font which is symbolic of the washing away of sins, and to the cross, the symbol of Jesus' death for us.

This building is a house of God, where we worship, we praise, we listen and we pray.

But God's house is much bigger, much grander, much more enduring: It is all of us together, with the followers of Jesus across the world and across the ages.

Let's be part of building God's house. Not a house of mud bricks or cedar or stone, but a house of people who, together, empowered by the Holy Spirit, make up the body of Christ.

Amen