

## Sermon for Evensong 13 April 2008

I want to say a bit about the Old Testament reading this evening. To some extent we are continuing tonight where we left off last week.

The focus is still the reconstruction of the temple of Solomon after the exile. Some 50,000 Jews returned. [Ezra Chapter 2](#) gives us a picture of the threads of normal life being picked up once more in the hillsides of Judah. But they need something, a focus, a centre point to prevent fragmentation. And the temple at the heart of Jerusalem, the city of God was that focus. In the September/ October 537 b.c following their journey back to their homeland, they “gathered as one man to Jerusalem” (v. 1), for the feast of booths, Tabernacles or the Feast of In-gathering. All these names cover the same feast.

It was important to the people to keep what they remembered of God's ancient law. But there was more.

First - They were signifying their unity. Scattered families and villages came together for the feast, which was a necessary part of nationhood.

Second - The Feast of Booths reminded the former exiles of the deliverance of their forefathers from Egypt centuries before. ([Lev. 23:42–43](#)). This rang all sorts of bells with the community that had so recently been delivered from its own bondage in a foreign land. So they travelled to Jerusalem, the spiritual focus of the whole people to praise their God for all his goodness.

Everything that follows in the small part of the story we heard tonight depends on this basic motivation.

And so the altar is rebuilt (vv. 2–3), not only for the feast which must be celebrated, but for all the offerings of the regular cult, namely the daily sacrifice and the various feasts. The song that accompanied the laying of the foundation of the Temple some months later (v. 11) shows that the people were well aware that their very existence depended on the

“steadfast love” of God.

I remember once, when I was training I discovered that the term "steadfast love" appeared over 250 times in the Psalms. I was so excited by this discovery. My tutor looked faintly amused. "Yes, dear boy, that is the 'hesed' the special love referred to in the covenant between God and his people." I should have realised of course. The people knew that everything, including their safe return from the exile, was due solely to the steadfast love that God had for his people. The emphasis is on the 'steadfast' of course - because their love, like ours, is variable, and blows hot and cold and is never constant.

So I am sure that their worship marked their gratitude to Jahweh for his deliverance. Recent events confirmed for them what perhaps the exile had caused some to doubt, namely that "his steadfast love really does endure for ever". The same song was used in praise of God at the dedication fo the original temple, 400 years earlier.

The Feast of Booths was designed to throw them back upon God's mercy. The worshippers did actually live for a week in makeshift accommodation, perhaps tents, outside Jerusalem. This camping out was in deliberate contrast to their permanent homes. It reminded them that God had delivered a wandering people, and also that their very existence was temporary. When they celebrated their entry into the Promised Land, this is just a part of the song that they sang before the Lord, as they offered their gifts "My father was a wandering Aramean, and he went down into Egypt with a few people and lived there and became a great nation, powerful and numerous. <sup>6</sup> But the Egyptians ill-treated us and made us suffer, putting us to hard labour. <sup>7</sup> Then we cried out to the Lord, the God of our fathers, and the Lord heard our voice and saw our misery, toil and oppression" and so on. The whole song is in Deuteronomy 26.

The people would not yet have had time to settle into any routine, no seasonal crops could have been sowed and harvested yet. They were still a provisional people - totally reliant on the Lord. It is much more difficult

to remember the fragility and impermanence of life when you own your own house, the farm is doing well and the children are all playing in the yard. It is even more difficult for us in the West. Very little can shake our world. The occasional power cut perhaps. But think of those in Iraq. Their world was hard until we wrecked it for them. Yes all our securities today are illusory, but it is very hard to take this fully on board when everything seems so permanent and solid.

You remember that God had told Haggai to call the people to rebuild the Temple. Zerubbabel and Joshua had got the work actually organised and started. The first thing to do was to build the altar. When that had been done the sacrificial system was able to kick in and God could be decently worshipped. Then finally the whole temple that housed the altar could be started. That was the plan.

But the day of Yom Kippur followed by the feast of Booths stopped the work on the temple. But the feasts had to be observed. And there is a lot set down here and elsewhere about the actual liturgy and ceremonial that was used. Did it really matter? Well probably not to God, but I am sure that it was vital for Joshua and the Levites to establish continuity with the past. They wanted to restore the old worship which had been handed down by God himself on the mountain. It was part of what made them the chosen people. And it was only by obeying the law that God would continue to show his steadfast love. So you can see how important it was.

Another point should also be remembered: Fear of hostile neighbours was a significant factor in ensuring that stayed on the right side of God, their protector.

I learn from the commentators who have gone into all this in great detail that as the priests and the Levites led the dedication service for the temple's foundations, they did the things that were prescribed long ago by David when they brought the ark in to the city. At that time priests blew trumpets and Asaph sounded cymbals. Here the priests again blew trumpets and descendants of Asaph played the cymbals. It was just like

the time when the ark was brought to the temple in Solomon's day.

In this rebuilding service the priests and Levites sang, He is good; His love to Israel endures forever, words almost identical to the song of praise in 2 Chronicles 5:13 and repeated in Ps. 136:1. This song of praise is so significant for by it the religious leaders were acknowledging that Yahweh had again established His loving protection over the nation. Nothing could be more important than this.

As the worship came to a climax, the people give a great shout. This exact phrase "gave a great shout" occurs at the battle of Jericho. While this can be understood as shouts of joy, but in connection with the movements of the ark it is nearer a battle cry. In the context of the fear of their enemies, was not the re-dedication of the temple an act of spiritual defiance to all the other powers? These are shouts to God their Divine Warrior and the shouts were heard 'far away' as indeed they were meant to be. God is a deliverer - so let the nations hear and be afraid.

Mixed in with the huge shout was the sound of weeping. The return home is inevitably a disappointment and the streets are not paved with gold. The building site does not look like the great temple of the old days. The fields of the past are always greener somehow.

What has all this got to say to us today? First we could say that **we** are the temple that needs to be rebuilt. That we, you and I, need to reestablish this close and loving relationship with God - from whom, if we are honest, we have tended to drift away. And the church has become ruined, and needs to be rebuilt in the way Jesus intended. We need a Haggai to rouse us in our generation. I was listening to Archbishop John Sentamu last Tuesday week. What an amazing and inspiring prophet that man is. His next living prophetic act is a parachute jump. I scribbled some notes at the time - he went so fast all I have is snippets.

He was talking about the church of God as an idea whose time has come. **We** are to be the engine and catalyst for change. **We** are to be a place for all those citizens who don't belong anywhere. The church is

temporary - transitional. We spend too much time worrying about the fabric and the fixtures, when the church is not that at all, it is people.

He took us all back to Jesus to get our instructions to plan the new rebuilding of the Christian temple: What were Jesus priorities? And he asked us:

Does God come first? And he left the question hanging. In Haggai's time the altar of God was the first priority, so what is ours?

And the church has to change if it is to grow.

Are **we** prepared to be engines of change - for the kingdom of God was founded on a movement of change from the old established religion into new wine, new life, no regulations. Will **we** put love where love is absent? The way we embrace this change defines our future. Will we seize it enthusiastically, or will we be an island which resists it to the death?

Outreach - God sent out 70 people with a message - he didn't gather them in! Is he sending us out - and what message do we take to our neighbours, our colleagues, our friends?

Love is at the heart of Jesus life. Are we people of love? Would others say that of us?

Prayer is at the heart of Jesus life. Are we people of prayer? Would others say that of us?

Archbishop John said a lot more - but time has run out. But let me tell you this: as this little man stood there, I could almost feel I was listening to Haggai - and I hoped I should be as inspired and moved as Zerubbabel and Joshua. And I hoped that I could play some small part in passing on the torch, and lighting the prophetic flame here in Upper Coquetdale. For God's sake.