

The True Temple of God

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In the book of Isaiah the prophet (2:2-3) we read these words:

In the last days, the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths."

The temple of the LORD is central to the religion of the Old Testament, and it remained central in the thinking of Jesus, although in a somewhat different way. The temple is also something that we should bear in mind as we walk in the ways of the LORD, as this theme is also central in the New Testament. But more of that later.

The temple of the LORD is unique among the temples of the world. It was firstly unique: there could only be one true temple, built in the place that the LORD had chosen, and it was there alone that God would dwell. In other religions, there can be as many temples as the followers of the various gods care to build; but not so for Israel.

Secondly, it was a temple completely devoid of any depiction or representation of God. There was no statue, no image, no painting, nothing whatsoever of that kind. Other temples worldwide all contain some form of representation of the god or gods worshipped there.

Thirdly, in the temple proper, the holy place was open only to the priests who were designated to perform the daily ritual service there. And the holy of holies, the innermost place, was entered by the high priest only once a year.

In many other respects, the temple at Jerusalem functioned like other temples in other religions. It was a centre of social interaction; it was a place of teaching and

scholarship; it held the sacred scrolls and the historical records of the nation; it formed a cultural symbol and centre of nationalism and civic pride; it was an architectural wonder. But these are peripheral to the real meaning of the temple. For the Temple of the LORD was the place where God said his presence would dwell. This does not mean that God was located in the temple. After all, it was the same Isaiah who said later in his book: *This is what the LORD says: "Heaven is my throne, and the earth is my footstool. Where is the house you will build for me?"* (66:1) When Solomon prayed his great prayer of dedication for the temple, he did not invite God to come to live in it, and he admitted "The heavens, even the highest heavens, cannot contain you. How much less this temple I have built." (2 Chronicles 6:18). Rather, he asked that God be attentive to the offerings made there, and to the prayers directed towards the Temple, and so to "hear from heaven" and respond. This phrase is repeated time and time again in his dedication prayer – when we pray towards this place, then hear from heaven and respond. And so it was that when Solomon had finished praying, the glory of the LORD filled the temple, so that the priests could not enter it.

But even though the glory of the LORD had descended, this was not God locating himself in the temple, but rather it was God placing his presence there. God was not present **with** his people, in the sense that he was here and not somewhere else. Rather, God was present **to** his people, meaning that they had his full attention. You may have noticed this phenomenon with children – they can be present with you, but not present to you – with a remarkable ability for selective hearing, so that even though they are in the same room, it can be well-nigh impossible to get their attention. In the Scriptures, the phrase used is to behold the face of God; for God to turn his face away from us; for God to hide his face from us; those who are repentant are called to seek God's face. In all these phrases, the intent is to show that while God is never absent from us, while there is never any indication he is not everywhere and upholding everything, he can turn away from us and refuse to respond to our prayers. It is only through earnestly seeking the face of God, in other words, demonstrating our full and complete love and obedience for him, and giving him our full and undivided attention, that he will turn his face towards us and bless us. God is present **with** us; he is not always present **to** us – for God cannot look on sin and turns his face away from us when we refuse to repent.

The significance of the absence of any image of God in the temple can be found in another important theme of the Scriptures; of human beings as the image and likeness of God. Repeatedly, God condemned the formation of images, and judged harshly those who committed this sin. Isaiah mocked those who made images of wood, stone or metal, which were lifeless, dumb and senseless, less than those who had made them, but considered to be able to perform wonders for those who prayed to them. The reason for the condemnation of the making of images is based on the fact that any such image is a substitute, not only for God, but also for the image that he had himself made to represent himself – human beings. What he was saying was simply, if you want to know what God is like, look around you at your fellow human beings. They are God's image, God's likeness, God's chosen representation of himself within the creation.

So to discard this high and holy calling of living and acting as God's image and representative, and to supplant that with a block of wood or stone, is the highest form of insult to God and to his own skillfully formed images. How could the true God be represented by lifeless metal, wood or stone? Only a living being would suffice. Sadly, however, we fail to live up to our calling, and instead of portraying God in the way we live, we demonstrate our own poverty of thought and vision, showing instead our own limited and sinfully distorted nature. And the image of God that should be displayed in our lives is often a misrepresentation, a parody of what God called us to be, and therefore misrepresents and parodies God. It has been said by unbelievers that God is a cruel, harsh, legalistic unforgiving God, largely because that is how God is portrayed, both verbally and through their living, by those who claim to represent and serve him. If we are to be the true representatives of God, in fact, to be the true representation of God, then we must become like him, and to do that we must learn from him and follow his ways.

The people of Israel, then, were exhorted by Isaiah to go up to the mountain of the LORD, to learn of God's ways and to walk in them. From that will come peace, safety, prosperity and justice. For in the temple of the LORD, where God is present to his people, we can find the words of life. We cannot make up our own rules for life; we cannot determine for ourselves how we should live, for we show ourselves completely incapable of doing that. And that is what we should expect, since we are called to live

according to the Law that God gives. We are not our own law-givers: we are created to be responsive to law that is given to us. And we can see the results when we try to formulate our own laws in claiming to be autonomous – that is, independent of God.

And so we come to Advent, the season of the year when we think on the coming of Christ. And we can see in the coming of Christ the fulfillment of the prophecy of Isaiah. For in Christ, the temple of the LORD was indeed established; it was raised up and all nations flow towards it. For in the New Testament, there is a deep and significant relationship between Christ and the Temple. Everything that the Temple was to Israel, Christ became and is for all the nations. The temple was unique; there could be no other temple; it alone was the place God had chosen. Christ was unique, he alone is the incarnation of God; the one God had chosen, there can be no other. The temple contained no image or representation of God; Christ himself is the image, the very representation of God to us. He is the true image of God, and only as we are conformed to Christ will we become the images of God that we were meant to be. The temple was holy, accessible only to the priests; Christ is holy, and is himself the true high priest; and all those who are called to his service are made priests, able to enter into the holy place to meet with God himself.

And in other respects also, there is a close connection between Christ and the Temple. It was the place of sacrifice; Christ was the full and final sacrifice. It was the place where sinners found forgiveness and redemption; Christ calls all sinners to himself and offers them God's full forgiveness and complete redemption. The Temple was open to all who sought God, not just Israel; Christ is the saviour of all nations, who welcomes all who will come.

When Jesus was engaged in controversy with the Jews, he challenged them to destroy the Temple, and he would rebuild it in three days. This was not just a metaphorical way of speaking; he really did refer to the True temple, the dwelling place of God's presence, when he spoke of himself in that way. In him was the presence of God. In him was found the image of God. In him were the prayers of the people answered, and through him did they find forgiveness and peace. He was the place of the law, the true teaching of God, the source and centre of the life of God's people.

And as we discover further in the New Testament, not only was Christ the new Temple, the presence of God with us, but we too who are called by his name, the ones who are his followers, are to carry with us the presence of God. We are to be reformed in his image, and we are to be both individually and corporately, the temple of the LORD.

This is why it is mistaken for Christians to refer to their churches as the house of God, as if God's presence is greater there than anywhere else. That is not to say we should not treat our churches with respect, but it is a species of idolatry to transfer the dwelling place of God, the place of his presence, to a mere building, when he has chosen us to be his temple, to be the bearers of his presence, to be the ones in whom he dwells. Paul speaks again and again of the human body as the temple of God, the dwelling place of the Holy Spirit, and therefore to be treated with respect and dignity, and to be kept from sinful sexual liaisons, from gluttony, from excessive adornment, and from any other treatment that detracts from its true glory – the temple of the living God. The body where God dwells by his Spirit is to be respected, and if we behave destructively towards our own bodies (or anyone else's for that matter), then God will punish us. We are the temple of the LORD, and God will protect and defend his temple.

Because our bodies are the temples of the Holy Spirit which we have received from God through faith, then we are not to engage in sexual immorality. We are to respect marriage, and to live chastely and faithfully with our wives and husbands. For it is a dishonour to God to engage in sexual relationships with someone other than our marriage partner. As a result of our membership of the body of Christ, we are no longer free to act as we would, but must respect our bodies as the temples of the Holy Spirit. We must live as faithful representatives of our holy God, demonstrating his way of love for each other, and rejecting the temptation to dishonour his name and reputation by engaging in immorality.

Not only are we as individuals the temples of the Spirit, which dwells within us, in our bodies, but we are corporately the temple of God. As a community of God's people, we are being gathered together and united as one to form the dwelling place of God. We are living stones, being built into a spiritual house where God can show

forth his presence and demonstrate his glory. Jesus is the cornerstone of the new temple, the foundation, the one on whom the whole house is built. The Spirit of God is binding us together with all those that love and fear the Lord, so that we can be a fit and proper dwelling place for God himself.

In Revelation 21:22 we read of the holy city that descends from heaven to the newly re-created earth, made fresh and clean again and with all the dross of sin removed. God descends from heaven to dwell with his people, to be present with them and to be always present to them. There at last we read that the conditions of the garden of Eden are restored; once again there is no temple, for God himself dwells there, and there is no need of one. Why have the representation when the reality has arrived? And what could fulfill the promise of the temple more than the stirring declaration of God from his holy throne: “Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be their God.” This is the purpose of all that was intended through the temple of Israel, through the incarnation in Christ, through the indwelling of the Holy Spirit in the hearts of God’s people. The intention of the ages has been realized, in that God and humankind dwell as one on the earth. God himself will be with us, and we will be his people. As a result, idolatry, sin and wickedness are done away, and we will receive the promise that there will be no more death, no more mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away and all things have become new. This is the promise of Christmas, for this is what Christmas is all about: God is finally acting to put an end to all that is wrong with this world, and in Christ he has come to us in person. As we commence the season of Advent, let us remember the purpose of that which we celebrate: all things will be made new, for Christ has come! Hallelujah.