

Homily

Sunday 26 August, 2018

Lessons 1 Kings 8: 1 – 6, 10 – 11, 27 – 30

St John 6: 56 – 69

The priests carried the ark of the Covenant into the temple. Newly constructed at the command of King Solomon, the Holy Temple was dedicated to YHWH, the God of Israel. At the heart of the temple was an inner room, *Kodesh Hakodashim*, the Holy of Holies, the resting place of the ark. A wooden chest covered in gold, the ark contained a pot of manna, Aaron's budded staff and the tablets of Sinai inscribed with the Ten Commandments. For the Hebrew people, this was the most sacred place on Earth, the dwelling-place of the Eternal. Once the priests had placed the ark and withdrawn, a cloud filled the house of the LORD. The cloud is a perfect image of the elusive God: present but impenetrable to the naked eye.

The cloud or cloud of glory is a symbol of the Presence of God; in Hebrew, the *Shekinah*. Shekinah is used to describe the abiding, dwelling or habitation of God. In Hebrew, Shekinah is a feminine noun. It was the Shekinah which Moses encountered on Mount Sinai, when a cloud enveloped the mountain. In the wilderness, Moses entered the Tent of the LORD's Presence, the Tent of Meeting to

speak to God: the cloud or Shekinah filled the tent or tabernacle. During their forty years in the wilderness, the Hebrew slaves were led by the Pillar of Cloud by day and Pillar of Fire by night. The fire by night was like the fire Moses found in the Burning Bush: it was the presence of God; the Shekinah. In the First Book of Kings, in a moment of mystical meditation, God said to Solomon, 'I will dwell among the people of Israel'. Centuries later, when Solomon's temple was destroyed by the conquering Babylonians, it was said that the Shekinah hovered over the temple ruins for three days before moving to the mountain to the east of the city.

Jesus lived during the period of the second temple. Rebuilt after the return of the Hebrew people from exile in Babylon, the Shekinah once again dwelt in the Holy of Holies. Once again the ark with the tablets of stone rested in Jerusalem, the Holy City. The Presence of God, the dwelling-place of the Shekinah, was a central piece of theology for Jesus' own people. They had a comforting sense of God's companionship. Solomon and every Jew understood that the creator of the universe, the maker of heaven and Earth, could not be contained in a temple, an inner sanctuary, a box, golden or otherwise, but, nevertheless, crucially, they believed in their hearts that they

were embraced by God, held by God: the Mystery which they could not define was with them, present among them. The Shekinah was at home among the people.

At the death of Jesus, in the midst of the drama of crucifixion, we are told that the veil of the temple is torn in two from top to bottom, that there was an earthquake and that rocks were rent. This is imaginative language of mythology to say that the Shekinah has finally left the temple, never to return. Throughout His ministry, Jesus taught His disciples, 'The Father and I are one. I am in the Father and the Father is in Me. I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.' That evocative imagery of flesh and blood spoken by Jesus means the very same thing: 'Those who eat my flesh and drink my blood abide in me, and I in them'. We are spiritually to feed on Jesus and let His life, teaching, death and the mystery of resurrection nourish our souls. The Shekinah is in us.

Why has this theology been historically important? Why is it important today? How does the theology of the Shekinah manifest itself in human societal development, in the evolution of ideas? God dwelling among us, God at home within us, within every human

being, within every individual endows the individual with status, worth, responsibilities and rights which might not otherwise be there. We are made in the image of God. In the Book of Genesis, it is the breath of the Eternal within us that gives us life, making us the conscious, rational and morally discerning creatures that we are. From the Judeo- Christian tradition, we are repeatedly told to love our neighbour as ourselves, to love our enemies, to treat others as we would ourselves want to be treated. In the Old and New Testaments, on the lips of Moses, the prophets, Jesus and Paul, we are to have regard for human rights: an explicit concern for widows, the poor, and the sick.

In the Song of Hannah and the Song of Mary, the women sing of God bringing down the proud and the mighty from their thrones and lifting up the humble and meek; God fills the hungry with good things and sends the rich away. In one of his many reflections of BBC Scotland's *Thought for the Day*, Bill McDonald said that, 'A caring society or community doesn't become so simply by saying it is'. He said, "It was Jesus who said to nice people like you and me, 'Inasmuch as you have done it to one of the least of these my brothers [and sisters], you have done it – or failed to do it – to me'."

Throughout the 1930s and 1940s, in a challenge to both atheistic communism and the far right political parties of Spain, Italy and Germany, the encyclicals and messages of successive popes explicitly brought together human dignity and human rights. The historian Samuel Moyn said, 'the human person became a key figure in thought at the United Nations, thanks to Christians who were impressed by papal language and who injected it into founding documents'. The institutional Church has on many, many occasions failed to be the Body of Christ, failed to live as Jesus lived, but, in the 20th century, 100 million people were murdered not by popes but by people of no faith or creed: Hitler, Stalin, Pol Pot and Chairman Mao.

In developing his theme of hospitality, of God's hospitality, the Scottish theologian George Newlands, writes:

Jesus is found ministering to 'outsiders' of every sort – the Gerasene demoniac and the woman suffering from chronic bleeding, the child of Syro-Phoenician woman, the centurion's servant, the ten lepers, the blind beggar. Jesus turns to the untouchables, those beyond the pale, flouting many of the sacrosanct moral, religious and social taboos of the time. The leper in Jesus' day was the archetypal outsider, forced to live outside the community, living the life of the damned, rejected by God as well as [humanity]. Jesus touches the untouchable in all embracing love and grace, challenging

the excluding mindset. Touching the leper, the living damned, is precisely the touchstone of God's own hospitality.

Jesus believed that the leper was made in the image of God and had the right, the God-given right to be human, to live as an equal in the community. The institutional churches have been far from perfect but, at their best, they understand *why* every human being is supremely valued: the Shekinah is within us.

Amen.