

Solomon, leadership and prayer

Rev Dr John Squires - St Ninians, 22 August 2021

If you have been following the Old Testament readings offered by the lectionary since Pentecost, you will know we have encountered some fascinating characters. We started way back in May with Hannah, mother of Samuel, and then have heard about Saul and David, the first two Kings of Israel; the prophets Samuel and Nathan; the giant Goliath and the beloved Jonathan; the unfortunate Absalom, Michal and Bathsheba; and, today, King Solomon.

We have seen the character of the leaders in Israel. These stories reveal that these leaders were human; they acted in ways that were devious, unscrupulous, scheming, manipulative, emotional, hard-headed, self-serving, and deeply flawed. All of this. From these ancient texts—as if we didn't already know this from our own observations of leaders in our own situation!

In last Sunday's passage, Solomon, son of David, was installed as king of Israel after the death of his father (1 Kings 2). God made a promise to Solomon: "I give you a wise and discerning mind; no one like you has been before you and no one like you shall arise after you" (1 Ki 3:12). And in the passage we have heard today, all the stops are pulled out, as Solomon gathers people for the opening of the Temple (1 Ki 8).

This journey through the narratives of the Hebrew Scriptures reaches its climactic point in this passage, where the greatest king of Israel, Solomon, prays to dedicate the grand religious building, the Temple, on the top of the highest hill in Jerusalem, the capital city of the kingdom at the point of its greatest influence and power. (The readings in following weeks will move into the literature attributed to and inspired by Solomon, the wisdom literature.)

So, we hear the account of this moment of dedication: "Then Solomon assembled the elders of Israel and all the heads of the tribes, the leaders of the ancestral houses of the Israelites, before King Solomon in Jerusalem, to bring up the ark of the covenant of the LORD out of the city of David, which is Zion. Then the priests brought the ark of the covenant of the LORD to its place, in the inner sanctuary of the house, in the most holy place, underneath the wings of the cherub. And when the priests came out of the holy place, a cloud filled the house of the LORD." (1 Ki 8:1–10).

Man, this is serious stuff: heavy, important, serious. The king. With all of his court. With all the elders, and the heads of each of the 12 tribes. And the priests, with the ark of the covenant. All assembled at the place where Solomon, king in all his majesty and power, had arranged for a temple to be built. "Then Solomon stood before the altar of the LORD in the presence of all the assembly of Israel, and spread out his hands to heaven" (1 Ki 8:22), and prays a long prayer of blessing for the new edifice.

Now, Solomon, I am sure you are thinking, is remembered as the wise one. "The wisdom of Solomon", we say. Jesus relates how "the Queen of the south [the Queen of Sheba]

came from the ends of the earth to hear the wisdom of Solomon” (Matt 12:42). In 2 Chronicles 1, God says to Solomon, “because you have asked for wisdom and knowledge for yourself ... wisdom and knowledge are granted to you” (2 Chr 1:11).

And later, King Solomon is said to have “excelled all the kings of the earth in riches and in wisdom. And all the kings of the earth sought the presence of Solomon to hear his wisdom, which God had put into his mind. Every one of [those kings] brought silver and gold, so much, year by year.” (2 Chron 9:22–24).

This wonderfully wise, insightful, discerning man, Solomon—bearing a name derived from the Hebrew for peace, “shalom”—became a powerhouse in the ancient world. But he did not always live as a man of peace. Indeed, he used his 4,000 horses and chariots and 12,000 horsemen to good effect; we read that “he ruled over all the kings from the Euphrates to the land of the Philistines and to the border of Egypt.” (2 Chron 9:26).

Solomon was remembered as king over the greatest expanse of land claimed by Israel in all of history. Solomon was a warrior. And warrior-kings were powerful, tyrannical in their exercise of power, ruthless in the way that they disposed of rivals for the throne and enemies on the battlefield alike. Think Alexander the Great. Think Charlemagne. Think Genghis Khan. Think William the Conqueror. Solomon reigned for 40 years—a long, wealthy successful time.

Yet in the passage we have heard today, Solomon appears not as a powerful king. Rather, he is a humble person of faith. He stands before all the people, raises his arms, and prays to the God who is to be worshipped in the Temple that he had erected. He is a person of faith, in the presence of his God, expressing his faith, exuding his piety.

Now, the prayer of Solomon goes for thirty solid verses; there are eight different sections in this prayer. The lectionary has mercy on us this Sunday; we are offered just two of those sections, eleven of the thirty verses. We have heard the shortened version! In these two sections of this prayer, Solomon identifies two important features of the newly-erected Temple. The first is that the fundamental reason for erecting this building is to provide a focal point, where people of faith can gather to pray to God (2 Ki 8:23–30).

Perhaps we may be used to hearing about the Temple in Jerusalem in fairly negative terms. Jesus cleared the Temple of the money changers and dove sellers who were exploiting the people. He predicted the destruction of the Temple during the cataclysmic last days. For centuries, people from all over Israel were required to bring their sacrifices to the priests in the Temple, to offer up the firstborn of their animals and the firstfruits of their harvest. The Temple cult was a harsh, primitive religious duty, imposing hardships on the people. The priests, the elites who ran the Temple, lived well off the benefits of all of these offerings.

I could offer you a counter argument to each of these criticisms; but today I simply want to note that Solomon, in his prayer of dedication, makes it clear that the fundamental purpose of the Temple was to provide a house of prayer, a place where the people of God could gather, knowing that they were in the presence of God, knowing that the

prayers that they offer would be heard by God and would lead to God's offering of grace, forgiving them for their inadequacies and failures.

The Temple was to be a place of piety for the people. It was to foster the sense of connection with God. It was to deepen the life of faith of the people. It was to strengthen their covenant relationship with the Lord God.

All of which can be said for us, today, about the building that (in normal times, not in lockdown) we come to each Sunday, to worship. The church—St Ninian's church—is a place of piety and devotion for us, the people of God. It helps us to foster the sense of connection with God. It helps us to deepen our lives of faith. It encourages us to strengthen our covenant relationship with the Lord God through the new covenant offered in grace by Jesus. That's what the church—this church, your church—is to be.

So we read in the first part of Solomon's Temple prayer. For the people of ancient Israel, standing in the shadow of this wonderful new building, the prayer might encourage a strong sense of self identity, blessed to be part of the people of God. Of course, it could also develop narrow nationalism, a jingoistic praising of the greatness of Israel, extolling their identity as the chosen nation, the holy people, the elect of God.

The Temple invited the people of God to meet the God of the people, to pray, to sing, to offer signs of gratitude and bring pleas and petitions—in short, to keep the covenant, to show that they are keeping the covenant, to be satisfied that they are keeping the covenant, as they worship. It had a strong, positive purpose for the people.

But that is not where the prayer ends. The second key element of Solomon's prayer that the lectionary offers us today (2 Ki 8:41–43) is striking. It also relates to prayer. But it is not the prayer of the people of God, covenant partners with the Lord God. It is about the prayer of "a foreigner, who is not of your people Israel, [who] comes from a distant land because of your name". This is a striking and dramatic element to include in this dedication prayer before all the people.

Solomon prays to God, imploring God to "hear in heaven your dwelling place and do according to all for which the foreigner calls to you, in order that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your people Israel, and that they may know that this house that I have built is called by your name."

Now that is an incredible prayer for the King of Israel to pray! It reflects an openness to the world beyond the nation, an engagement with the wider geopolitical and social relatives of the world at that time. Solomon was not an isolationist. He was not inwardly focussed on his nation. He had an outwards orientation. He did not want the Temple simply to foster a holy huddle, shut off from the world. He had other intentions. He wanted the Temple to be a holy place, a place of welcome and invitation, open to people from across the region, from far beyond the territory of Israel—a gathering place for all the peoples.

That was the vision that Solomon set forth for his people. That was not always the way that the Temple actually did function, we know. But that was the foundational vision—articulated by Solomon, remembered by the scribes, included in the narrative account of the kings, placed in a strategic position at the opening and dedication of the Temple. It is a vision which speaks, both to the people of Israel, but also to people of faith today, in the 21st century world.

So I have a whole cluster of questions in my mind, as a result of pondering this aspect of the prayer of Solomon.

What happens in our temples? in our churches?

How do we foster relationship with God in our prayers in this place?

Who do we expect to find in our temples, our places of worship?

Who would be most surprising to find in our places of worship?

What prayers might come from those we least expect to come into our places of worship, when they do join with us in worship, to pray?

How might we position ourselves, so that “foreigners”, people most unexpected to us, can feel welcomed to come into our church, be at home in our midst, make a connection with God?

What do we need to do differently?

What do we need to stop doing?

What do we need to start doing?

Let us take seriously the claim that when we hear scripture read and expounded, we encounter God speaking to us. “The Word of God on whom salvation depends is to be heard and known from Scripture appropriated in the worshipping and witnessing life of the Church”, our Basis of Union affirms (para 5). That applies not only to Gospels and letters in the book of the new covenant, the New Testament, but also to narratives and psalms and prophetic works in Hebrew Scriptures.

Let us reflect on the prayer that this discerning man of wisdom, warrior-king Solomon, offers as the Temple is dedicated; and let us live our lives in response to that vision of what a place of worship and a community of worship might be—a place open to all, a people welcoming of all who wish to come and make connection with God.