

Church 4: “Stones & Buildings” – Daniel 12¹⁻³, Mark 13¹⁻⁸

Morning Communion, Kingdom 3, 18th November 2012

This is the fourth sermon in our series on church. The previous sermons have talked about the church as a community of servants (Ali), the people of God (Richard), and the anvil of the ego (not surprisingly, with a title like that, Vince). The sermons have loosely sprung from the lectionary readings for the relevant Sundays, and today’s is the same, though the connection is a little tenuous. So, contrary to what everyone has said to date, we are going to be looking at the church as buildings.

We are picking up on Mark 13¹. I am not going to look at the Daniel reading, which relates to the ‘end times’ aspect of the Mark reading. *As Jesus was leaving the Temple, one of his disciples said, “Look, Teacher! What wonderful stones and buildings!”*

The temple in Jesus’ time was not the one built by Solomon ; that had been destroyed by the Babylonians in 586BC. This temple had been rebuilt by Herod the Great, on the same site. It had taken 46 years to build, and was magnificent. As Solomon’s temple had been previously, it was central to the Jewish faith, God’s residence on earth (in the Holy of Holies), a place of pilgrimage, a centre of worship. Jews were required (in theory) to visit it three times a year, at the feast of the Passover, Pentecost (Luke 2⁴¹) and Tabernacles. Certain ceremonies could only be performed there, such as the sacrifice on the Day of Atonement. Children were taken there to be dedicated, as with Jesus (Luke 2²²).

Jesus’ answer to the disciples is interesting. Instead of a conversationally agreeing with them, or celebrating its beauty and the way it displayed God’s glory, Jesus takes the subject off in a very different direction. *“Not a single stone here will be left in its place; every one of them will be thrown down.”* He uses this to lead into teaching about future events and suffering, about the end times, about being ready for the return of the Son of Man.

Jesus’ prophecy started to be fulfilled in AD70, by the Romans under the future emperor Titus. The temple was completely destroyed. It was burnt down, and its stones were pried apart to retrieve the molten gold that had dripped into them from the roof.

Jesus certainly respected the temple. He drove out the traders and money-changers because they were defiling ‘his Father’s house’, as he called it (John 2¹³⁻²²). He often went there with the disciples, and regularly taught the crowds in the temple courtyard.

The early church were then in an interesting place with regards to buildings. They saw themselves still as Jews, but as Jews who recognised Jesus as the Messiah. It was natural to continue to see the temple as God’s house (so Peter and John go into the temple to pray, Acts 3¹). But persecution soon meant that they could no longer have access to the temple. Nor, for a couple of hundred years, in most places, could they meet openly, yet alone consider making the statement of building churches. They met in homes or in secret places like the Roman catacombs.

And then there were statements by Jesus. To the Samaritan women at the well, Jesus had said: *“Believe me, woman, the time will come when people will not worship the Father either on this mountain or in Jerusalem... But the time is coming and is already here, when by the power of God’s Spirit people will worship the Father as he really is, offering him the true worship that he wants.”* (John 4).

When Jesus died on the cross, the temple veil ripped in two (Matthew 27⁵¹). The significance of this to Jews was immense: God was no longer confined to the temple, but had come out into the world.

It was very possible to look back on the Old Testament as see the temple as a concession, rather than what God had wanted. God never asked for it (2 Samuel 7). God had originally chosen to show his presence on a mountain, to move with his people in a tent. Through David's prayer, he allowed Solomon to build the first temple. In the New Testament, when the deacon Stephen is stoned to death, he concludes his incendiary to the Jewish council by criticising Solomon's decision to build the temple with the words "*But the Most High God does not live in houses built by human hands; as the prophet says, 'Heaven is my throne, says the Lord, and the earth is my footstool. What kind of house would you build for me? Where is the place for me to live in? Did not I myself make all these things?'*"

So what do we think? This building is known as a 'church'. Does that mean it is a sort of temple? Is this a 'house of God'? Is God specially present here? Do you find a sense of God within buildings, within this building?

It is common to hear people refer to beautiful old cathedrals and abbeys as having been built 'to the glory of God'. Many church buildings are amazing, and do seem to lift the spirit. And much of the beauty and art was there for a purpose: stained glass windows, pictures and statues would have been used in pre-literate days to illustrate teaching. (Today we have a projector). If you are ever going near it, visit Chartres in France to see the picture stories in the original mediaeval stained glass windows.

Our church is not particularly beautiful (apologies if you think it is), but it has some great features. We were discussing 'church', in the wider sense, at our homegroup a couple of weeks ago. I asked people both what they liked about St. John and St Stephens, and what they disliked. I was, miserable pessimist, expecting to be overwhelmed by dislikes and having no-one able to think of anything positive. Quite the reverse, very little bad emerged, and people were very positive. One point was how good it is to be 'in the round' in our building. How you can see people, greet them. How people have felt miserable, been spotted by others during the service, and been comforted afterwards. And how the building seems to help people be welcoming.

And yet, much Christian writing and thinking is very negative about buildings. It is a commonplace to say that the church is the people, not the building; presumably in a reaction to the belief of most of the population that it is the other way round. Church buildings are seen as cold, unwelcoming, unfriendly, and designed to keep the congregation away from each other. Also, designed for a show where all the action happens on a stage in the chancel, while the congregation, or audience, stay in the nave, though with their view obstructed by pillars.

In preparing for this sermon I looked at several books that pretty much wrote off of church buildings as disobedience to the will of God. They were criticised for making Christians inward looking; for consuming huge amounts of money, time and energy that should be devoted to God's work; for making Christians expect people to come to them, rather than going out into the community; for making the church fixed, immobile, and permanent, rather than being flexible and able to change at God's command. And a few more things too.

Such criticisms have elements of truth in them. You can sometimes wonder if we have got everything wrong. There is much to criticise. I came across a great quote by Hilaire Belloc, "*When one remembers how the Catholic Church has been governed, and by whom, one realizes that it must have been divinely inspired to have survived at all.*" But equally, much of the criticism made is much too

harsh and uncharitable. Another quote: *The trouble with born-again Christians is that they are an even bigger pain the second time around.*

It is hard to believe that the almost universal desire among Christians to have a regular meeting place or a building of their own is totally misguided. It has the benefits of providing a place for the creation of a community that can then reach outside.

Criticisms of church buildings do point to problems. I think there should be soul searching and prayer before we spend large amounts of money on buildings. But then I think of Mary pouring the perfume on Jesus' feet in John 12, an expensive act of adoration that Jesus did not criticise. What would he say about a cathedral?

A positive point about church building is that people can find them. How do you find a housechurch without someone inviting you?

Interestingly, and to conclude, our English word for church says quite a lot. In many other languages the word for church is derived from the Greek *ekklesia*, "those who had been called out"; thus *église* in French, *chiesa* in Italian, *iglesia* in Spanish. This is the aspect of church we have heard about in the last few weeks, where the church is the people or community of God. But the English word *church* comes from the Greek *kurike*, "belonging to God"; so also *kirk* in Scottish and *kirche* in German. Both we, and the building, should belong to God, and should be used in his service. (Isn't it interesting that we call what we are doing now a 'service'.) Where we, or it, does not belong to or serve God, there should be change. Where we, or it, are being used in his service, we should continue.

Jeremy Thake
St. John & St Stephen

Questions for discussion:

1. Is God specially present in some buildings.
2. If He is, do they have to be beautiful, old, large, plain... ?
3. What is the place of art, beauty, grandeur... in churches
4. Should Christians concentrate our resources on outreach and community work rather than on church buildings?
5. How should we use church buildings?