

"CHRONICLES OF ENCOURAGEMENT - 3"
2 Chronicles 7:11-22

Every now and then, I get invited (as, probably, do some of you) to the opening or dedication of a new church building. (It is to be fervently hoped that we'll have such an event here before too much longer.) I think the last one I attended was the opening of the new Methodist Centre up in Tamworth Street. Usually, there is a certain amount of uplifting worship – in which you can sense the relief of the participants that the whole project is now finished – and some stirring words from a denominational worthy. Someone vaguely well-known will declare the place open, and then in the time-honoured tradition of churches, there will be a tea, which will, no doubt, have re-opened the acrimonious debate about the re-designing of the kitchen facilities amongst the people preparing it.

By and large, though, these are inspiring and encouraging occasions. It means that somehow God's work is being continued and, at least in this particular place, there are enough people and resources for the Kingdom of God to expand, even if it's only by the re-siting of the toilets. I often come away from such services feeling pretty good (if not sometimes a little jealous!). But just imagine being there on the actual occasion described in *2 Chronicles*. I think if I'd been there, I wouldn't simply have been uplifted – I'd have been flat on the floor in awestruck amazement. Here was this magnificent new building, the Temple in Jerusalem, showpiece of the combined effort of the most skilled craftsmen in the Middle East, constructed with the finest materials possible (you can look back into chapters 2 and 3 to find out about that). And the courtyards were heaving with thousands of people, priests in their richly ornamented robes, livestock ready to be sacrificed, the sound of singing and music from all around (like Charles Ives' *Holiday Symphony*), the smells of incense and burnt offerings, the excitement of all these people on a momentous occasion.

And in the middle of all that, Solomon himself stands up on a bronze platform, holds up his hands for quiet, and launches into a great prayer for God's blessing, a prayer of dedication of this new Temple. That's all to be found in *2 Chronicles 6*, the chapter before the one from which we have read this evening. We're looking at it as the third part of a short series entitled "*Chronicles of Encouragement*", based in part on some words which Pat Cartmale shared with the elders as appropriate to this church at this time in its history.

And while he is praying – *pow!* – the glory of the Lord fills the Temple (7:1-3). **The Living God** meets with his people. He comes into the Temple with such power that the priests cannot actually get into the building. This is something else - an experience of God that is beyond anything they had ever seen, and beyond anything we have ever seen. It makes the "Toronto Blessing" seem like a strict Brethren meeting!

People hit the floor and cry out in worship. This is the Living God, a great God, an awesome God. This is not a God to address with cheerful little ditties and happy handclaps: this is not a God who can be tamed by liturgy or declarations of intent: this is not a God who can be put into a little box and taken home until next Sunday. This is the Living God!

And there's a great response from these awe-struck people. One hundred and forty two thousand animals are sacrificed (that would put the cat among the pigeons with the custodians of the church kitchen!), the Temple musicians strike up, and the celebrations go on for a fortnight. Can you imagine that? Imagine coming down here this evening to spend a few minutes in worship, as you usually do, with the expectation of a few songs, a couple of prayers and the usual drone from the minister, then back home in time for the second half of *Coronation Street*. Well, you don't need to imagine that – you're here doing it. But imagine what it would be like to have come expecting that and then finding things turned out differently – meeting God and getting so involved in worshipping him that you don't get home until November! When you meet the Living God, you cannot ignore him.

But this Living God does not only inspire our worship in church and on special occasions. This Living God is at work in our world all day and every day. The power of a summer storm, the splendour of an autumn sunset, the intricacy of frosted foliage in winter, the beauty of a new-born spring lamb – these are all demonstrations of the activity of the Living God. The healing of a broken limb, the appearance of a friend at just the right moment, the Spirit's inner strength after prayer, the joy of good news after bad – he's at work in the routine and the ritual of our lives. Our God is an active God. He was active in the time of Solomon as he had been in the time of Israel, and as he has been in the time of Jesus, of Paul, of Chad, of Luther, of Wesley, of Spurgeon, and still is today. This is an awesome and eternal and faithful God – as we sang this morning, "*Our God is a great big God*".

But he also "*holds us in his hand.*" Later - probably much later - away from all the joy and emotion of that experience, God comes to meet with Solomon. In the quiet of the night, in the privacy and intimacy of his own bedroom, Solomon hears God speak to him. "Look," says God, "that was an amazing experience you had, but remember - I'm still there. I'm always there." "*I have chosen and consecrated this Temple so that my name may be there for ever. My eyes and my heart will always be there.*" (v16) Michael Wilcock, who wrote a commentary on this book, says "*God's communication with Solomon has taken the form of words that engage the mind as well as fire that thrills the soul.*"

These are the words now of **The Loving God**. God is going to own this project, to bless Solomon's Temple more than he can imagine. Solomon has prayed not only the prayer of dedication in chapter 6, but also that famous prayer in chapter 1, where he asks for wisdom: he has prayed within God's will. It

was not simply that God gave what Solomon asked; it was that Solomon prayed what in the first place God wanted him to ask. And God puts his mark of ownership on it - "*My name shall be there for ever.*" And he promises, in direct answer to Solomon's prayer in 6:20,40, that his "*eyes will always be there.*" He will be watching, caring, always alert to the needs of his people. God has answered Solomon's prayer. But as always with this Loving God, there is more - much, much more.

His heart will always be there too. The heart of God, the compassionate, tender heart of God, the heart overflowing with love which inspired David and Isaiah and Hosea and John, will always be there. It needs to be a compassionate heart, for God knows that his people will fail and that he will have to punish them.

But when they fail and disaster strikes there will be a way out. *VI4* talks of the people's humble repentance and God's forgiveness and healing. It's here that most sermons on this passage are centred – on a people who need to humble themselves and be abased, people who fail and mess up. We beat ourselves over the head with this verse and try to identify our "*wicked ways*". We use it to underline just how far our nation has moved away from God. And suddenly, in the midst of this wonderful passage about the greatness of God and the awesomeness of his love, we find we're looking at ourselves, concentrating on our own shortcomings and bewailing our own iniquities.

Now, I don't want to ignore the fact that we do mess up, but if we spend all our time dwelling on that, we lose out completely on the grace and love of God. What God is saying here to Solomon is that his heart would always be open for them. This new Temple represented a fresh basis for restoration and forgiveness. The people were able to start all over again. After the Exile and the all the destruction which had led up to that, it was rebuilt again as a sign that God had kept faith with his people. In Jesus, we have a new and ultimate basis for restoration and forgiveness - Jesus who would destroy the Temple and rebuild it in three days (*John 2*). Jesus, who demonstrates the loving heart of the living God for us.

Yes, we do need to take praying seriously. Yes, we do need to approach God with humility and with pleading on our own behalf and on behalf of our nation. But unless we have a proper awareness of who God is and what he does then our prayers and our penitence will be useless. There's no point beating our breasts before God if we don't recognise his love for us – or our praying will lack any focus. There's no point praying for his healing – for ourselves or for our land – if we don't realise that he is alive and active.

God still lives - we still experience his power. God still loves - the promise of his eyes and heart will always be there. This is an awesome God and an intimate God - and he is still at work for you and me. Be grateful!