

**Sermon preached at Marlborough Road Methodist Church
at the Morning Service on Sunday 21st June 2015
by Revd Barry Tabraham**

Theme: Temple and Tent

using the text “Then Abram built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. After that, he moved on . . . (Genesis 12:7-8a)

INTRODUCTION

Although many of you who know who I am, it’s nearly six years since I last conducted a service here, and it occurs to me that I will be a strange figure to some of you. And to those of you who do know me, I hope I don’t appear too much older, though I know I’m older, because at my last birthday, the candles cost more than the cake!

It’s good to be back here at Marlborough Road, especially as you’re celebrating 150 years of Methodism on this site – even though the buildings have changed hugely since then, and folk who are coming back after an absence of years might hardly recognise the place.

Let me tell you, very briefly, the experience of one man – a musician, who happened to play the bagpipes at gigs and special occasions. On one occasion he was asked by a funeral director to play at a graveside service for a homeless man. He had no family or friends, so the service was to be at a pauper's cemetery in the wilds of Nova Scotia. Let him take up the story in his own words:

As I was not familiar with the backwoods, I got lost and, being a typical man, I didn't stop for directions. I finally arrived an hour late and saw the funeral party had evidently gone and the hearse was nowhere in sight. There were only the grave-diggers and crew left and they were eating lunch. I felt badly and apologized to the men for being late. I went to the side of the grave and looked down and the vault lid was already in place. I didn't know what else to do, so I started to play.

The workers put down their lunches and began to gather around. I played my heart and soul out for this man with no family and friends. I played like I've never played before for this homeless man. And as I played the hymn *Amazing Grace*, the workers began to weep. They wept, I wept, we all wept together. When I finished, I packed up my bagpipes and started for my car. Though my head hung low, my heart was full.

As I opened the door to my car, I heard one of the workers say, “I’ve never seen nothing like that before and I’ve been putting in septic tanks for the last twenty years.”

Well, there’s no chance of me getting lost (because I’m here!) and not recognising the church! But this did make me think of **the words we use to describe the church**.

Just suppose I gave each of you a piece of paper and asked you to write down one word that summed up Marlborough Road Church for you – what would you write? . . . Hard, isn’t it? After some time you might put down words such as ‘community’, ‘family’, ‘worship’ – perhaps even ‘hospital’ or ‘business’, though I doubt it!

I know that, in our hearts, we all believe and *know* that the church is people, but I venture that few of us would use the word **‘temple’**, and even fewer would write down **‘tent’** – perhaps none at all. And yet those two words are used extensively in both the New and the Old Testaments as symbols or images of the Church, and I want to offer some very brief reflections on them this morning,

because they can help us understand what we should be about as Christians here at Marlborough Road.

(1) "TEMPLE"

In the Old Testament the Temple was of supreme importance to the Jews. It represented the focus of their worship. Jerusalem was the very centre, and the Temple was:

1. **the centre of celebration for all the major Jewish festivals**, such as the Passover and the Feast of Tabernacles – which I suppose was the forerunner of our present Harvest Festival; where sacrifices were offered to God, and
2. where the **Ark of the Covenant** was kept (containing the 10 Commandments), in the "holy of holies"

And when the Israelites returned from exile, one of the very first things they did was to rebuild the Temple at Jerusalem (book of Nehemiah). Even the early Christians, who were, after all, Jews, continued to worship at the Temple – as did Jesus of course. A living tradition has always needed a focus for its activity. That is why, from the very earliest accounts, we find Abraham building an altar to God. It was a visual reminder of the fact that he was in the presence of the Living God.

Christians still need that kind of focus today. Our church buildings are a physical witness to the gospel.

- If they look old and out of date, then newcomers may well feel that the gospel itself is something that belongs to a bygone age.
- If they are modern and help to express the theology of the present age, and enable worship and mission to be effective, then outsiders will judge that we have a vibrant faith that is the key to our living.

(2) "TENT"

But the tent has always been of great significance, too. The tent, or 'tabernacle', in which the Ark of the Covenant was kept before the building of the Temple, was necessary because the Israelites were a 'travelling, wandering race'.

'Then Abram built an altar there to the Lord, who had appeared to him. After that, he moved on . . .'

In the early Christian Church the tent became a symbol of change, movement and outreach. Just as we worship a Living God, who constantly calls us into the unknown, so we proclaim a dynamic Gospel, which has at its very heart the need for human beings to change.

It's less easily grasped as an image, because movement and change – being more abstract – are less easily represented than the more concrete aspects of our faith which are associated with the 'temple picture'. But they are a vital part of our Christian pilgrimage. After he had been imprisoned by the Nazis for some time, Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote: 'One learnt to live on friendly terms with total insecurity.' Abraham must have felt like that. He was called to abandon all his natural roots – his land, his kindred and friends, his home – and to become a man living in a tent, to wander off with only the vaguest of travel directions.

TEMPLE AND TENT!

There has always been a **tension between 'tent' and 'temple'** in the history of the Church. It can be seen in the debates between **Paul** and those who saw the Church's mission to spread outwards to encompass the gentiles – the Greek-speaking peoples to the west, and those who were concerned to maintain the Church with its centre in Jerusalem. In the end, as we know, Paul's view prevailed, and the early Christian Church at Jerusalem eventually declined to a point where it simply disappeared from sight.

Which model will serve us best today and tomorrow? You know my preference for ‘having my cake and eating it’ wherever possible, and in this case I believe that, provided we are faithful and obedient to the will of God, we can have both.

1. The danger in being over-preoccupied with the TEMPLE model is that institutions can lead to bureaucracy and stagnation – and buildings can suggest a fossilised, inward-looking community. That must be avoided. **But we need our church to be a TEMPLE.** We need a secure base from which to operate. We need our institutions – yes, and we need our committees, or at least some of them! We need our church to be modern, functional and a thing of beauty, because it is for the glory of God and essential for our worship and mission.

2. The danger with over-emphasizing the TENT model is that the Church can become disorganised and lacking in focus. Without proper structures it can lead to individuals ‘doing their own thing’, and, at worst, the Church degenerating into freakish sects. **But we need to keep the image of the TENT** firmly in our minds, so that we can be adaptable and able to respond to the changing times and needs of the modern world.

CONCLUSION

When the early Christian writers spoke of the Church they used the Greek word “**EKKLESIA**”, which literally means, “called out”. In the Old Testament, Abraham and his descendants – the people of Israel – were the church! **Jesus** did not found the Church. Rather, he renewed the existing one, and from his many Jewish disciples he called out twelve apostles who were the small beginnings of what has now become a world-wide community of more than a billion people.

Ultimately – and I’m sure you wouldn’t have to be told this – the Church is people. We are the people of God, and we are

- called to a life of worship and service, both in this ‘base’, this ‘temple’ that we know as Marlborough Road Church, but also
- ‘called out’ to a pilgrimage of faith, to grow and change,

and, above all, to alter Charles Wesley’s words slightly:

*to serve the present age,
our calling to fulfil,
O may it all our powers engage
to do our Master’s will!*
