

“The Temple of the Spirit”

(Acts 2.1-13)

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Introduction – In Spirit and Truth

Do you remember the conversation Jesus has with the Woman at the Well? She’s a Samaritan and he’s an orthodox Jew. A major dispute between their two peoples is where the presence of God resides – in the temple in Jerusalem or at Mount Gerizim – Jacob’s mountain – in Samaria. So, in the spirited banter between them she says,

“Our ancestors worshipped on this mountain, but you say that the place where people must worship is in Jerusalem.”

And Jesus replies,

“Woman, believe me, the time is coming when you will worship the Father neither on this mountain nor in Jerusalem. (Indeed) the hour is coming, and is now here, when true worshippers will worship the Father in spirit and truth... God is spirit and those who worship must worship in spirit and truth.” (John 4. 20-24)

The Temple and Pentecost

It’s radical teaching for a Jewish rabbi, because in the ancient period, the temple was seen as the very centre of Jewish faith. On the day of its dedication, in the reign of Solomon... the *shekinah*, the glory of the Lord, descended and filled the whole temple. The Lord came down in ‘fire and cloud’. (1 Kings 8.10-13) And so the temple was believed to be ‘God’s home on earth’...where God dwelt. To go into the temple was literally to enter the presence of God.¹ Thus it was a mandatory place of pilgrimage for all Jews, no matter where they lived in the world... and there were some sins and some impurities that could only be dealt with there.²

¹ The Jews understand and saw God’s presence ‘everywhere’, but He was particularly present in the temple.

² It was the only place of sacrifice, and only temple sacrifice could forgive some sins and cleanse some impurities... because that’s where God lived on earth.

On the day of Pentecost as described in *Acts*, divine fire once again descends from heaven... but this time it doesn't fall on the temple... or any other building or place. It falls on people! God's glory, God's Holy Spirit, is seen no longer in a temple of stone and gold, but shining exuberantly and ecstatically in people. It rests on them like fire and drives them out to the street in wild excitement, speaking the language of the whole world! And this gift is not restricted just to a special privileged few... a small group who perhaps deserve it for their righteousness, but *Acts* says, it spreads then and there to 3,000 people... a crowd representing 17 different named nations... in other words, the whole world! (*Acts* 2.38-41)

As Jesus prophesied... the day is now here. In the new creation of the Resurrection, God makes his home in people... The Spirit comes to reside in us! And if we're going to relate to God – the heart, centre and essence of all life; the ground of all being – then we're going to have to learn to connect with the Spirit who lives within us... *and* each other. It's what Jesus said to the Woman at the Well, "*God is sheer being itself – Spirit. (From now on) those who worship God must do it out of their very being, their spirit... their true selves...*"³

You Are The Temple

The new temple of God is the human person – this theology is at the centre of Paul's preaching of the new life of resurrection.⁴ God is spirit... and this divine spirit resides... makes Her home in... us! Paul writes in his *First Letter to the Corinthians*,

"Surely you know that you are God's temple, where the Spirit of God dwells... the temple of God is holy and you are that temple!" (REB 3.16-17)

And again in *Ephesians* (2.22)

"...you are a dwelling place for God" or as Eugene Peterson translates it... *"you are a temple in which God is quite at home."*

This is pretty incredible to our 21st century ears, but it was mind-blowingly revolutionary in the ancient world... where 4 out of every 5 people were owned by others as slaves, where women and children were the property of men... and men were allowed to do whatever they liked with their property. Abuse was the norm! And yet here is the Christian gospel announcing a radical and

³ Eugene Peterson's translation of John 4.24

⁴ NT Wright says that we're mistaken in thinking that 'justification by faith' is Paul's great theme. He argues that this is the BIG one!

powerful dignity... a profound value... for every human person. No longer is the human body a cheap commodity... for in us, the Spirit of God has taken up residence.

You can imagine the attraction of such a gospel – it falls like sweet delicious rain on a tortured earth. Scholars think it was this particular dimension of Paul’s preaching that brought such rapid response in such a small period of time. Who doesn’t want to hear that they’re worthy and good?

How amazing and beautiful this is... to our ears too! Think about it...

- We are created to be sacred ground... to be holy.
- This is the fundamental beauty... the reality... of who we are.
- Our failure does not distance God – God’s spirit is at home in us.

The Challenge of Responsibility

But with this dignity comes responsibility...

Here’s Paul again...

“Don’t you realise your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit? Then... honour God in your body.” (1 Corinthians 6.19-20)

In other words... don’t defile or besmirch the divine spirit by abusing the sacredness of your body.

The two abuses that Paul mentions in this particular context, are gluttony and cheap or promiscuous sex.⁵ Such behaviour violates the sacredness of the body. If our bodies are temples of the spirit, then what we do with them matters.

(I rarely get a chance to talk about sex in church, so here’s the opportunity...) This is Paul’s argument about cheap sex...

“There’s more to sex than mere skin on skin. Sex is as much spiritual mystery as physical fact. “The two become one.” (So) we must not pursue the kind of sex that avoids commitment and intimacy, leaving us more lonely than ever—the kind of sex that can never “become one.” In sexual sin we violate the sacredness of our own bodies, these bodies that were made for God-given and God-modelled love, for “becoming one” with

⁵ “Fornication”.

another. Or didn't you realize that your body is a sacred place, the place of the Holy Spirit?" (1 Corinthians 6.16-20)

And of course the same reasoning applies to any abuse of the body – food, alcohol, drugs... And it also extends to our behaviour – gossip, criticism, judgemental attitude, jealousy... – all besmirch and dishonour the Spirit that lives within.

Our beauty as the dwelling place of the Spirit, calls us to responsibility about *how* we live...

When I became priest at St Mary Magdalene's, I was initially unnerved by the practice of the traditional Anglo-Catholic congregation, who would bow to me as I walked past in procession. If you'd asked me *before* I went there, I would have assumed such a custom would fuel one's ego and reinforce that awful world of priestly superiority left-over from a previous age. But it did exactly the opposite... It wasn't *me* they were honouring – indeed many of them bitterly resented the changes I was introducing, and some of them vigorously disliked me... yet they bowed all the same... They were acknowledging the dignity of my vocation as a priest... the responsibility I carried especially in worship... and the Spirit of God they *expected* to be operational in my life. Instead of breeding superiority in me, their custom brought a reflective humility... and encouraged my resolve to be faithful in my work and holy in my person.

Dignity comes with responsibility... to actually *live* as the sacred home of the Spirit.

And it's not just a matter of recognising this beauty in our selves... but also in each other.

Conclusion

In Indian Hindu culture, it's traditional for people to greet and farewell each other with clasped hands (what we'd call *prayer position*) and a reverent bow, saying *Namaste*... which means, '*The Spirit within me salutes the Spirit in you.*' It's a beautiful recognition of the sacred reality in all people.

Here's the great Christian mystic, Thomas Merton, describing his own epiphany moment... when he looked at the ordinary people around him and realised they were indeed temples of God's spirit...

*“It was as if I suddenly saw the secret beauty of their hearts,
the depths of their hearts where neither sin nor desire
nor self-knowledge can reach, the core of their reality,
the person that each one is in God’s eyes.*

*(But) there is no way of telling people
that they are all walking around shining like the sun...*

If only we could see each other that way all the time.

*There would be no more war, no more hatred
no more cruelty, no more greed.*

*I suppose the big problem would be
that we would fall down and worship each other.”*