
Setting up a Tent

1 Corinthians 3.9-17

A Sermon preached for the Nazareth Companions on November 27, 2023 by Revd Dr Sam Wells

I'm very much aware that those who worship online, and the Companions in particular, can somehow feel less than normal church. I want to turn that assumption upside down tonight, by looking at the imagery of worship in the Bible.

I'm going to begin by talking about the significance of the city. The scriptures are rather ambivalent about the status of the city. The first city in the Bible is established by Cain, after he has killed his brother. Eleven chapters into the Bible we have Babel, the self-sufficient city that knows not its need of God. Abraham leaves the city of Ur to follow God's call and we all know that Sodom and Gomorrah are hardly the poster children for the city. It is building cities in Egypt that constitutes the Israelites' slavery. It's pretty much all bad news for the city until we get to the one city that becomes the desire of the nations: Jerusalem, the city of the living God. And then for the rest of the Bible we have this tension between the city of God, epitomized by Jerusalem, and the human city, epitomized by Babylon, the place of exile, the reincarnation of Babel, the prison into which the people of God are always likely to lapse if they insist on going their own way. The tension reaches a climax when Jesus, having been largely acclaimed in the countryside, culminating in Palm Sunday, is then rejected in the city by his very own people. The whole drama between Babylon and Jerusalem is played out again in the book of Revelation, and the finale is that a new Jerusalem comes down out of heaven, reaffirming the permanent place of the city in God's imagination, and the ultimate goodness of human daily life in the destiny of God.

Our conventional worship strives to represent this renewed Jerusalem. We worship not alone, but together, with friends and strangers. In hymns and songs we strive to depict and embody the life of the new Jerusalem, finding our voice in the praise of God, joining the heavenly choir. Yet we also recognize the failure and pain of the city. We make our confession together, recalling not just our petty, personal sins but our collective and corporate failures, and in the intercessions we bring before God the needs of our city and the burdens of its people. Worship is about the transformation of Babylon into Jerusalem: coming before God to turn the frayed and damaged fibre of our common life into a woven tapestry that reflects God's glory.

But there's another tension that runs through the Bible, and it begins even earlier than the story of the city. It begins in the garden. The word paradise comes from a Persian word that means "walled garden." Besides the notion of heaven, the garden is the most significant image of human longing in the Bible. The Garden of Eden is a paradise of home and workplace, a harmonious ecology of human endeavour and divine abundance, both good for the practicalities of food and pleasant to the aesthetics of sight. Added to that comes the intoxicating garden of the Song of Songs. The garden in the Old Testament is the perfect blend of God's provision and human work. It's not simply a natural thing that grows by itself, but a carefully nurtured result of planting and tending. And so there's a direct link between the labour of the garden and the toil of agriculture. Farming brings forth the fruit of the soil in a similar blend of divine provision and human response.

A beautiful church building like St Martin's is like a walled garden. It is designed as a sanctuary in which people come together to experience humanity and God in perfect relationship. When we bring forward bread and wine, the fruit of the field and the work of human hands, we strive to depict the right relationship between God, humanity, and the earth. And no moment in the liturgy is more poignant in our current period of human existence than this handing over of the bread of our ordinary life and the wine of eternal life – when we embody our prayer to God to show us how to get that relationship between heaven, humanity and the earth right.

The Bible sets before us one further location that stands in creative tension with the garden and with the city. And that location is the desert. The desert is a place sometimes of danger and sometimes of death. It is a place in the book of Exodus of murmuring, of the people's rebellion against God and their punishment with 40 years of wandering. It is a place of evil, temptation and

redemption, as the tradition of the sending out of the scapegoat and later the 40 days of Jesus in the wilderness make clear. It is a place of revelation, most evidently in the burning bush, in the voice of John the Baptist in the wilderness, and in Jesus' feeding of the five thousand. And just as the garden is linked logically to the plough and the harvest field, so the desert is linked by a similar logic to that archetypal place of revelation, the mountain. It is on the mountain, itself a deserted and sometimes desolate place, that Moses receives the Ten Commandments, Elijah hears the still small voice, and Jesus is transfigured in glory and later taken up to heaven.

The desert stands in many ways as a perpetual critique of the city and the garden. It literally represents the shifting sands of uncertainty, doubt, and mystery. Most of all it represents the image of journey, of pilgrimage, of the incompleteness of what we so far have and know, of the need to pack light, travel on, and settle for nothing less than the ultimate prize. The practice of worshiping online as Companions is a desert experience of having no abiding city and journeying on, seeking the city that is to come.

So here are the three key scriptural places of encounter with God: the city, the garden and the desert. I wonder whether your place of encounter with God is a temple, a garden or a desert. I wonder whether at this moment in your life you feel like you're in a temple, a garden or a desert, and whether being part of the Companions feels like moving from one to another, or discovering a new dimension. Three thousand years ago King Solomon strove to bring these three themes together under one roof. He built the Temple in Jerusalem, to synthesize the sacred space of the walled garden, the divine commerce of the city, and the completed pilgrimage of the people's exodus from Egypt. And yet the Temple collapsed in the catastrophe of the exile, with the sacred garden overgrown by the worship of other gods, the glory of Jerusalem exchanged for the idolatry of Babylon, the everlasting pilgrimage calcified by a static sense of entitlement. We are always at risk of making the same mistakes. We too are always liable to make our Jerusalem a Babylon, to neglect our garden, to halt our perpetual pilgrimage.

But here's the twist. The centre of our Christian story is not a Temple. The centre of our Christian story, where the strands of city, garden and desert are woven into one, is not a permanent, eternal Temple... but a fragile, provisional tent. In John chapter 1 verse 14 we read, "And the Word became flesh and lived among us" – that's to say, "the Word became flesh and set up his *tent* among us." And in Revelation chapter 21, when the holy city comes down and there is no more desert and the glorious healing garden is all around, the voice from the throne says "Behold, God's dwelling – God's *tent* – is among mortals." It is the *tent* that unites the provision of the outdoor garden or field, the interaction and concourse of the city, and the desolation and pilgrimage of the desert. The Word became flesh and set up his *tent* among us. Behold God's tent is among us, God's people. Jesus is the vortex of the scriptures, the epicentre of the images of God, the summit of the three stairways to heaven.

And here in 1 Corinthians 3 Paul takes us that one stage further. He talks of planting and growing, and says, "You are God's field". And then he turns toward the city and says, "You are God's building." And finally he recognizes the work of Christ and says, "You, you Corinthians, are God's Temple." You are the place of encounter between God and God's people. You are the place where others will meet God. You are the tent that unites the city and the garden and the desert.

All of which tells me that online worship and community is not your conventional city, garden or desert: but is more like a tent. A provisional tent that can be set up almost anywhere, like a laptop or iPad. To join the Companions is not to sign up to a fixed location, but to be of no fixed terrestrial abode. Like Jesus. Who sets up his tent amongst us. Sets up his tent in scripture and in sacrament. And who by the power of the Holy Spirit makes us God's tent, the place of encounter, the place where God's glory dwells. We come together in our different locations ready to meet God and make God known in the challenges and temptations of the city, in the pain and fear of wilderness and the waste places of the earth, and in the stillness and growth of the garden. This is our Companionship in Nazareth. This is community. This is the scripture come alive in us.