

God abolishes churches!

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Nic Denny-Dimitriou, Anglican Church of the Ascension, Hilton

Our readings continue the post-Easter themes, also leading us into the celebration of the Ascension this coming week, and with an eye on the upcoming celebration of Pentecost Sunday in two weeks' time. My sermon focus today is the New Testament reading from the Revelation to John. One of the important aspects of this book is that it reminds us that there is a wider reality to 'existence', that from a faith perspective, this earth – even our universe – is only part of the full picture of what God has in store.

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**Revelation to John 21: 10 - 11 and 22 – 27**  
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Sometimes, for our sakes, God is willing to settle for second best. Sometimes God allows us to have something that God wishes we could do without, but knows we can't. The best-known biblical illustration of this is the monarchy of ancient Israel.

The people said, "We want a King." God said, "Don't be stupid, you don't need a king. Kings turn into megalomaniacs who overtax everyone and send your sons off to war. You'd be better off without one." But the people said, "We still want a king." In the end, God conceded that while it would be better if the people didn't need a king, they couldn't seem to cope without one. So God settled for second best and gave them a king. There are plenty of Bible passages that make it sound like God is so much behind the king that the monarchy must have been God's idea. Having settled for second best, God gets right behind the monarchy and makes the most of it. The fact remains though, that in God's ideal world there would be no kings.

Sometimes when God settles for and gets behind a second best option, we completely forget that God wasn't too keen on the idea in the first place. We can even get to the stage where we think it is the most precious thing in the world to God.

Our NT reading from the Revelation to John, like most of the book, contains some startling images. John has a vision of the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God. This is the centrepiece of God's new creation, and the description of it is breathtaking. The city is lit up with the glory of God and people come streaming through its gates from all over the world to worship God. The water of life runs through the middle of the city from the throne of God and the Tree of Life grows there, bearing fruits and leaves that bring healing and life to all the nations of the earth.

What we are seeing in this vision is what has been called the marriage of heaven and earth. Once the new holy city is established as the vision depicts, with God's throne at its centre, there is no more distinction between heaven and earth.

When that happens, nothing that's second best will remain. Once we taste the fullness of God's best for us, we'll no longer be twisting God's arm to let us have anything less. Everything that falls short of God's ideal will be abolished and replaced with God's perfect alternative.

Now among all the startling images in this vision is a little reference to a feature of the new Jerusalem that highlights another second-best we've settled for. And it's one that may come as a shock. When the reign of God comes to fruition and the new holy city is established at God's command, it will be a city without even a single church building! Church buildings of all kinds - from the humblest chapel to the most grandiose cathedral and the most ornate church - all of them will be abolished, and God may be glad to be rid of them!

John doesn't go into any great detail on this. He simply says, while describing the city he saw in his vision, "I saw no temple in the city, for its temple is the Lord God the Almighty and the Lamb."

Why is there no special holy place of worship set aside in the city built by God? Because it doesn't need one. Because ideally we would have never needed one, but God let us have them anyway because we weren't coping too well without them.

Now this obviously raises some questions. After all, we're gathered here in a church building. It's not the most ornate or awe-inspiring in the history of church architecture, but it is officially 100 years old this month, was designed by Herbert Baker (before he became "Sir"), and it is a very beautiful building that has been prayed in for longer than any of us have been alive. Because the things we do in it are considered good and godly things, we take care of it and spend good money to look after it and to beautify the surrounding gardens and to preserve it for future generations.

The whole place stimulates us to pray and worship. It is a place where the distance between heaven and earth feels a lot less. So why is God not too keen on such places? Why are they no more than second best? Why is God planning to abolish them? And what does that mean for the way we worship in this place?

Part of the answer to those questions is given in the brief reference in the vision. A temple would be superfluous. When everything is brought to fulfilment and heaven and earth are one, there would be no meaningful function that a Temple could serve.

For us, the church building functions as a kind of icon or sacrament. When we look at an icon, we don't claim to be looking at God, but rather at something that helps us to think of God. When we come to the altar rail for the sacrament of bread and wine, it is not because we think bread and wine is all there is of Christ, or that Christ is nowhere else; but because in focussing our attention of the presence of Christ here, we can begin to taste more of the presence of Christ everywhere.

The church building can be like the icon or the sacrament. We don't claim that God is more present here than anywhere else, or that heaven is closer to earth here than anywhere else; but the church is a place where we are used to focussing our attention on the presence of God, and it is a place where we are used to praying as though we were walking through this space right into the banqueting room of heaven.

So with time and practice it has become easier for us to perceive God's presence here than in many other places. We have set it apart for holy use in order to help us to be aware of the sacred in everything.

But in the new holy city, with the throne of God in the centre and the whole city lit up with the glory of God, what would be the point? When every place has become sacred space filled with the presence of God, how could you set aside a space to be more sacred? We would have no need of special places to help us to open ourselves to God and to train us to perceive the presence of God elsewhere. So a special holy place set aside for the worship of God would be as useless as having a special space set aside for breathing.

But that's not all there is to the Revelation's note that there will be no Temple, no church building, in the new holy city. It can also draw to our attention some damaging things that church buildings potentially do to our understanding of God and our practice of faith.

This was by no means the first time in the Bible that the value of the Temple was questioned. There was debate when King David first proposed building a Temple. "Does God live in houses made by human hands?" asked the prophets. Jesus saw the temple as something that needed "cleansing" and he predicted its destruction, with no apparent upset at the thought. John's image in the revelation seems to be the last in a long line of biblical passages suggesting that sacred buildings had always had the potential to corrupt true religion.

One reason for this was evident in ancient Israel. An ideology grew up around the Temple that said that because it was the house of God, it stood to reason that God would not let his house be destroyed; therefore the city where the Temple stood was immune to disaster.

The people's image of God became so localised that they thought that God cared about this place more than any other and that therefore they were under God's protection whether they lived in accordance with God's will or not. The presence of God came to be seen as located in and almost confined to a fixed object. The temple became a lucky charm, an idol - the thing they trusted to protect them and ensure their well-being. And so, like every idol, it became an obstacle to God, rather than a mediator of God.

Then there was all the activity and hierarchy that came to be associated with the Temple, or with any other big sacred building. It is easy for those whose work and livelihoods revolve around the temple to begin to think and teach that it is the maintenance of the Temple and its staff and its ritual activities that is the centre of true religion.

But as important as your offering for God's work is, God is more interested in whether you love your neighbour. God is more concerned about whether you are merciful to those you meet during the week than how well you sang the hymns, more concerned to see people doing justice than to see them doing good liturgy.

The use of church buildings is primarily for shaping people who will worship God in the way they prayerfully live their lives in love, mercy, justice and peace. But the history of such places shows how easily they can be corrupted so that we substitute the adoration of the place for the honouring of God in our living.

When God let the people have a Temple – and later, church buildings – it was a risky move: a second best option as a concession to our need for things and places to help us perceive the presence of God and taste the fruits of heaven. God allows us to make use of such things, and even honours our use of them, because God knows that most of us are still a long way short of being able to do without them.

We need to be aware of the danger of repeating the mistakes against which Jesus and the prophets spoke. Churches and their ceremonies can contribute to our ability to be the people of God who live out the love, mercy and justice of God in the world. But in the Revelation, John tells us that the day is coming when they will be utterly superfluous. God will have given us a new holy city with no church buildings at all because we will know that every place is alive with the presence of God and we will worship God with our every action and our every breath.