

Worship in the new World – Sunday 26 Sept 2018 – Rev Merv Aitken – Sermon notes

Readings: I Kings 8 v 1-13; Psalm 84; John 6 v 66-69

How many of us have still got a tent at home?

- Originally a mass of sagging and sodden canvas which threatened to snap the poles and leave us homeless. I grew up with various kinds of tents – my parents lived in one in Ohope and Whakatane after the war. Army Surplus ridge-pole. Quite comfortable – wooden floor and kerosene lamps.
- When I joined the Boy's Brigade – we had bell tents – very useful- but the stitching around the pole was tired and often during the night the tent would slowly descend upon the sleepers.
- In today's world we have progressed from nylon tents to enormously strong high-altitude tent which are virtually indestructible.
- If there is a need for temporary accommodation the tent is still a very useful item.
- The children of Israel had made their way down to Egypt to avoid the famine – but when they left hurriedly to escape the pharaoh they ended up in tents --- for a long time..... 40 years.
- They wanted to maintain their worship practices – hard to do when you have to pack up your kit every day and move along.
- So what do you do... you make something portable... a travelling shrine. In it you place your objects for reverence... the Ten Commandments... And you get the religious to carry it (priests and Levites)
- So came about the Covenant box... the Ark of the Covenant... made of acacia wood... covered in gold... a box that was carefully placed in the Tent of the Presence where the Shekinah... the glory of Lord... the dazzling light of God's presence was seen.
- The Covenant Box was the way the people recognized that God was amongst them...God was never far from them... and God was not left behind if they had to move on!

People who change from being nomads to settlers in their land have different ideas.

- They become crop farmers, they raise cattle and sheep, they build houses, their economic life changes. They don't have to move around – they start accumulating possessions... they quickly lose interest in insubstantial things like tents.
- At around the 10th C BCE... Solomon became the king and history paints him as being quite wealthy. He decides to build a house for God... what a house - read about it in 1st Kings.
- He used the best of everything – no expense spared as the real estate agent would trumpet. When it came to the Holy of Holies - the place where God lived in the Temple – they had to stop for a moment – can anyone remember where we left the Covenant Box...! Anyone seen one lying around...? When it was found, it was duly dusted off and installed in the Temple.
- So, finally, God has somewhere to live that befits his role. God was dazzling again. God was at the centre of the city...!
- The Temple flourished - the worship was uplifting – all was well – except that in this long process Solomon had denuded the country of the cedars of Lebanon and used up all the workers he could find, all the gold and silver was gone and the people were revolting.
- With the country at a low ebb the ruler of Assyria... Sennacherib came down, wiped out the Temple and carted all the people off into Babylon – They sat down and wept... when they remembered Zion. (Boney M)
- They found it hard to forget what it was like before they got carted off... The people in exile made a point of remembering and when they got back into their land, leaders - people like Ezra and Nehemiah – rebuilt the Temple and the Wall. 516 BCE. Ezra finds and reads the Book of the Law and people hear it with great joy. All is well...!
- Until the Romans turned up...! Now there's just a few stones left of the original temple and the Hasidic Jews jealously guard them and woe betide any ignorant tourist wanting to take a picture.

- I guess this is a potted version of the past that has affected our worship practices - but we need to be reminded that worship changes and the buildings and ideas that inspired our forebears just don't cut it anymore.

So where are we in NZ in 2018...?

- We have built our places of worship throughout New Zealand... Our skylines were once dominated by the spires of our Churches and Cathedrals... now they are dwarfed. We can still go into our best examples of Church architecture and look up and feel that we are in the presence of the God who lifts us up and dazzles us. We can marvel at architectural design and stained glass and if the organist is playing or the choir singing we can indeed be lifted up into high places.
- But... Those of us who have watched our Holy Places being swallowed up by commercial buildings or housing developments are feeling a bit miffed. Sure, we want progress but at what expense?
- Some of us now sit and look up and see visions of the Earthquake and War Damage Commission (EQC) and read the letter from the Council. We look up, and instead of loving God, we wonder who will replace the lightbulbs and sweep away the cobwebs...? Who will pay for the strengthening of walls and roofs...?

Is it time for us to have a close look at the portable shrine?

- Is it time for us to get closer to God by gently bending our necks in the attitude of prayer and focusing on our cell-phones? (demonstrate)
- Will we gather by pressing 'My Group' or some such app that brings our friends onto our screen?
- Will our communion be held at the local coffee bar?
- Will our music come through an i-pod?
- The other day I took a funeral where the hymns were electronic – we listened to someone singing we had no words – it lacked something... but that's come about because people don't want to sing our old hymns... and they don't like the words or the tunes of the new ones.
- I think Jesus saw the light quite early in his piece – he started off in the Temple... but soon ended up in the country, on the water, in people's homes and there is no record of him singing.
- A revolution is taking place... But instead of leading it we are being swept along by it.
- I have conducted worship for about 50 years... But I am becoming aware that not enough has changed.
- Worship is an action which should bring us into the spiritual realm – that realm is shrinking...
- Can we find a way out of the impasse? Or are we the last generation who will be able to say 'here is the church, here is the steeple, open the doors and here's all the people!'

Now – time for you to have a say!!

We talked about the idea of preserving the Church for others. Who are these others? The ones who like to use the Church for a "good funeral". We heard about the young leaders at a conference who are in the wider church and busting with ideas and energy. We talked about flexibility – do we have to use our current worship model? Can we use films, DVD'S Café worship and still feel that we have worshipped together? We talked about the health of the congregation... We are enjoying what we are doing. Leave it alone! We talked about the pews – (electric cables). Do they prevent interaction? We talked about running the heaters and maintaining the buildings.