

Total Commitment

Readings 1 Kings 8:54-61 & Mark 1:35-39

Who doesn't love a royal wedding? The pomp and ceremony. Most will probably remember Charles and Di's wedding and of course Will and Kate's. The horses, the crowds, the service, the music... The ceremony both in and outside the church can affect even the hardest of hearts.

In the Old Testament reading in 1 Kings 8 we see Solomon leading a huge and impressive ceremony. All the leaders of Israel are there. The sacrifices are countless. It is a huge celebration as Israel completed the Temple – a hugely important place – a place where people could commune with God. We could not overestimate the importance of the Temple for Israel. It is the culmination of promise and hope realised.

We may think that this church building here is important and if it were lost there would be tears. But we know that our relationship with God isn't dependent upon this building, don't we? We know that if this building didn't exist we could still relate and connect to God. The connection to this building is more sentimental than theological.

But in Solomon's time the Temple represented their very faith. It replaced the tabernacle that journeyed with Israel since Egypt; representing the presence of God with them. So when the Temple was destroyed many years later it sent shock-waves throughout Israel. And it meant that Israel needed to reassess their theology of God, their Covenant, the way they could relate to God, everything that they took for granted. How could we imagine doing this – rethinking our theology in a new and radical way? Heck, look how confused some got over recent issues – women bishops and priests or more recently human sexuality or even things like hymns or modern songs – service styles... What if we had to think of relating to God in a totally new way? We probably can't even imagine it.

The Temple represented the Covenant relationship with God. And we can see earlier in chapter 8 that when people went astray it was the Temple they would return to – the place of God. When they were defeated in battle. When the rains failed. When the crops were destroyed. Even though they were well aware that God was far bigger than any earthly building, the Temple was for them their connection to God. There they would find forgiveness for their repentance. There they would find their way home.

Solomon concludes the ceremony with a final prayer that included these words:

May he [God] give us the desire to do his will in everything and to obey all the commands, decrees, and regulations that he gave our ancestors. (1Ki 8:58)

We cannot underestimate the importance of these words. They are so easy to say, so easy to imagine and yet what does it mean? What does it actually mean for us to completely obey God? Do we become like some kind of Christian robot that is programmed in a certain way? Do we become some kind of spiritual guru? Do we need to become like the assistant priest? Would you need to change – or what would we need to change to obey all these commands in the Bible? How different do you think we would become?

This is important – in fact it is essential to our faith, because we have this idea that being obedient, being faithful to God means certain things. But what certain things are they exactly? The interesting thing in the Bible is that what many people thought, especially in Jesus' day, was being good was in fact misguided. It's why people found it so hard to accept Jesus, because his obedience and his holiness was like nothing people imagined. It was only after his ascension that people slowly began to work it out. How can we ensure we aren't deluding ourselves too?

So what does this mean for us? What does it mean for you? What does it mean for this parish and the year that is quickly passing by? ...the desire to do God's will in *everything*.

This is vital to our faith, because how do we know we are being obedient to God? Is it coming to church Sunday morning, whether you want to or not? Is it making sure you pay your tithes – with thanksgiving? Is it being part of extra church group activities? What do you think God means by being obedient and are we

fulfilling this? Or are we letting ourselves off the hook a little? Is it actually doing more or less? How do we live this out? Extremely important questions for those who claim to be followers of Christ.

This church like many other churches probably talks about getting our message into the community so that more people may know Jesus in their life, right? And there seems to be this huge barrier getting people to church. I know that in Kaikoura we struggled to get new growth. It is so hard and the church seems to be hitting their heads against a brick wall trying to find an answer that would open people's hearts to God. It's almost like a puzzle that once we get it right the floodgates will open and we will be inundated with new folk. Often defined as hoping for a revival. But for a while now these gates have been firmly shut.

But the point I think is this. When we try to share our faith it can sometimes come across as a sales pitch. Getting the jargon right, getting the theology right, trying to create the right events that will draw people... When we see in the two passages read this morning that this is completely the wrong way around.

If we get ourselves right before God then people will start being attracted to us naturally. Look at what it says in 1 Kings again:

In the future, foreigners who do not belong to your people Israel will hear of you. They will come from distant lands because of your name, for they will hear of your great name and your strong hand and your powerful arm. And when they pray toward this Temple, then hear from heaven where you live, and grant what they ask of you. In this way, all the people of the earth will come to know and fear you, just as your own people Israel do. They, too, will know that this Temple I have built honors your name. (1Ki 8:41-43)

And in the gospel reading we see with Jesus how everyone was looking for him. There is something of God that is inherently attractive to people. Now we could say that because Jesus was doing miraculous signs it attracted people. And we could say that if someone started doing that today in this place there would be queues around the block of people trying to get into Holy Trinity. But the fact is that the miracles themselves didn't save people. The miracles came and went and people quickly lost any influence it had on them. With the ten lepers only one encountered Christ. Sure the others found physical healing the only one found spiritual inner healing, we could say. The miracles, though great, are a red herring to encountering God. It is the power of God working in the lives of people that makes the difference. So it's not the miracles themselves but the power or the person behind the miracles that is most important and often overlooked.

It is the power of God working in our lives that will make the real life-long difference. It won't matter how slick our theological knowledge is or how much of the Bible we have memorised or what miracles we may be able to perform. It will be what people see of God in our life that will make the difference; the long term life-changing difference. And the secret is this... How much God is part of our life is dependent upon entirely upon us... our true obedience.

It depends on our obedience to God that is on God's terms, not ours. It is dependent upon the life we chose to live. It is dependent upon our response to God's call in our life each and every day.

The point is this. Each of us who declare to be followers of Christ has something the world doesn't have. Our point of difference is Christ living in us. This is what people will see or perhaps, more alarmingly it is what the world isn't seeing in us. It is why we need to ask ourselves the hard questions. It is why we need to be truthful and honest. It is why we need to more seriously than anything else about our desire to do God's will in everything and to obey all the commands, decrees, and regulations that God has given us.

Our faith, our mission, our calling, our work begins with ourselves realising what it truly means to be followers of Christ ourselves. Beyond jargony words or traditions – both old and new – things that look good but don't really give the life Christ gives.

So let me ask the question again – What, for you, does complete obedience to God look like in our life – in your life, in my life. Because the answer reveals the source of life and this is what the world sees.

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