

God Makes a Promise (2 Samuel 7)

A sermon by Tom Frame (22/07/18)

During the seventeenth century the Mughal Empire was flourishing in India. One of their great kings was called Shah Jahan. In 1631 his wife, Mumtaz Mahal, died while giving birth to their 14th child. Shah Jahan was grief-stricken. After several days completely alone grieving for Mumtaz he gave orders for the construction of a tomb for his wife. The tomb took 22,000 men & women over 20 years to complete & was made of gleaming white marble. Inside it was decorated with 28 different kinds of precious & semi-precious gems. A sheet of pearls was spread over the coffin. The doors were made of silver & a gold railing surrounded the monument. This magnificent building was declared a World Heritage Site in 1983. Its name? Yes, it is the Taj Mahal.

Shah Jahan was not the first, nor the last person who wanted to build something beautiful for the one he loved. This is exactly what King David, the greatest king of Israel, wanted to do for God. Of course David was not thinking of building a tomb. He wanted to build a temple and to make it the central focus of Jerusalem - his capital city. He also had the Ark of the Covenant, which represented God's presence with His people, moved there. He made Jerusalem both the political & religious centre of the nation. And so we come to 2 Samuel 7.

We read in verses 1 and 2, "After the king was settled in his palace and the LORD had given him rest from all his enemies around him, he said to Nathan the prophet, 'Here I am, living in a palace of cedar, while the ark of God remains in a tent.'" David knew the Lord had been with him through all the years of struggle. When he was just a teenager looking after sheep, God used him to win a great victory over the Philistine giant Goliath. Overnight he became a hero. But then he faced a major problem. King Saul became incredibly jealous and feared a conspiracy to replace him. He was determined to kill David, but the Lord brought David safely through all the years he was on the run from Saul who was eventually deposed. Finally, David was crowned king. He defeated Israel's enemies and, at last, was able to start building the kingdom. No longer was he a hunted man on the run. He was king over a unified nation. No longer was he hiding in caves. He was living in a palace.

David was not someone who only turned to God in a crisis. And he was not someone who forgot God as soon as the crisis was past and things had settled down. Even after he became established as king, David was very conscious of the good hand of the Lord upon him. Enjoying peace, comfort, wealth and power did not lessen his love for God. The fact he was living in a palace made of expensive cedar wood while the Ark of God was housed in a simple and ancient tent made David feel very uncomfortable. It just did not seem right!

God deserved better than a simple tent. So David's idea was to build a permanent house of worship in Jerusalem, a place of magnificence that expressed his love for the Lord. Why?

David had pure motives for wanting to build a temple. He was someone who longed to worship. He composed and sang praises to God. No wonder he wanted to build a magnificent temple where not only he, but the whole nation, could worship. David was passionate about loving and serving God ... and consulted the prophet Nathan about his plan. Not all prophets were sincere or spiritual; they could be cynical and self-serving ... but Nathan certainly was a true prophet in tune with God, someone through whom God spoke to the king and the nation. And we read: "Nathan replied to the king, 'Whatever you have in mind, go ahead and do it, for the LORD is with you.'" This was a good start.

Nathan thought that what David was suggesting, building something more permanent for the Ark of the Lord, was perfectly honourable and eminently practical. He knew that the Lord was with David and presumed whatever David had in mind would be in accord with the will of God. But Nathan jumped to conclusions. He did not consider what the Lord might have thought about David's idea. Sometimes we too are a little too quick to make decisions based on the best of intentions. We are faced with what seems an exciting option. It sounds like a great plan – but we should prayerfully consider what God might think about it. Reflection is what this process is called ... trying to find a vantage point to see how things look other than through our own eyes.

In a gracious but unmistakable way, the Lord corrected Nathan ... and let him know that He had a different plan, "But that night the word of the LORD came to Nathan, saying: 'Go and tell my servant David, 'This is what the LORD says: Are you the one to build me a house to dwell in?'" God was in no way angry with David. He knew his heart. And He referred to David as "my servant". But David needed to know that now was not the time and he, David, was not the one to build the Temple. He had too much blood on his hands; it might have looked too much like personal vindication of David and all his actions.

The message God gave to Nathan to convey to David was gentle but clear. God said, "I have *not* dwelt in a house from the day I brought the Israelites up out of Egypt to this day. I have been moving from place to place ... with a tent as my dwelling. Wherever I have moved with all the Israelites, did I ever say to any of their rulers whom I commanded to shepherd my people Israel, 'Why have you not built me a house of cedar?'" Through the prophet, God reminded David that an elaborate Temple was not needed for worship to be heartfelt ... to be acceptable. The tent that housed the Ark of the Covenant had been the symbol of God's presence but no-one should think that God's substance was limited to a dwelling made of canvas.

God instructed Nathan the prophet to tell David: “Now then, tell my servant David, ‘This is what the LORD Almighty says: I took you from the pasture, from tending the flock, and appointed you ruler over my people Israel. I have been with you wherever you have gone ... Now I will make your name great, like the names of the greatest men on earth.’”

This is a completely unexpected turn. David wanted to build a house for God but God promises to establish a house for David (verse 11). God goes on to promise that David’s descendants would succeed him ... and one would have a special role. In verses 13-15, God says about this son: “He is the one who will build a house for my Name, and I will establish the throne of his kingdom forever. I will be his father and he will be my son. When he does wrong, I will punish him ... But my love will never be taken away from him.” This son was Solomon who would build the Temple and become known for his wisdom and insight.

Although God did not allow David to build the Temple, perhaps because it would become a shrine for David as much as a temple for God, a promise was made that revealed a far greater plan. In verse 16 God says, “Your house and your kingdom will endure forever before me; your throne will be established forever.” God was to give David a dynasty that would last forever. David’s earthly dynasty ran for 400 years. This a very long time but 400 years is not the same as “forever”. Does this mean God’s promise to David was not kept? No. God’s promise about his descendants sitting on an earthly throne was conditional upon their following in the ways of their father and ancestor David. When they stopped following the Lord, they lost the throne. Israel descended into civil war and the people were taken into exile in Babylon – modern day Iraq.

But the promise is ultimately fulfilled in Jesus – a direct descendant of David. A thousand years after God’s promise to David, on the Day of Pentecost as Peter preached to the crowds in Jerusalem, the leader of Jesus’ followers spoke about David. Peter said, “God had promised him on oath that He would place one of his descendants on his throne”. (Acts 2:30). Peter went on to explain that his master Jesus will reign over heaven and earth. As the angel said to the virgin Mary when he announced she was to give birth to a child, “He will be great and will be called the Son of the Most High. The Lord God will give Him the throne of His father David and he will reign over the house of Jacob forever; His kingdom will never end” (Luke 1:32 & 33).

In all, 2 Samuel 7 is a remarkable passage. David devises a plan to honour God; David is told no by God; David accepts what he is told; God devises a plan to honour David; David accepts what he is told. There are three take home lessons for us.

First, other people can be the means by which God communicates with us ... be they family, friends or strangers. Second, God can refuse our goodwill and generosity if it doesn't accord with the divine plan or might result in us rather than God receiving the glory. We are to shine in such a way that the light of God is seen through us. Sometimes doors close on good intentions. Third, we should never underestimate a divine promise. When God makes a pledge, the fulfilment is generous and not selfish. We cannot exceed God's kindness or compassion. Therefore, there is no need to strike a deal with God unless we feel the need ourselves to be held to account. God will fulfil the divine side of the equation.

Those who built this church in 1875 were remarkable people. They made sacrifices to provide a place fitting for divine worship. 143 years later, we honour their conviction and celebrate their commitment each time we gather here. We can draw some inspiration from their devotion and deeds ... and know they wanted to promote worship. But it was never intended to be the only place and the only time in which God would receive worship. This was something that God felt the need to remind David about 2000 years ago. We might remember this and make our whole lives an act of worship to the glory of God and for the sake Christ. Amen.