

## Seventh Sunday after Pentecost – 23 July 2006

### God's Place

2 Samuel 7:1-14a; Ephesians 2:11-22; Mark 6:30-34, 53-56

I want to reflect on God's place in this war-torn, violent world. I want to explore a place, a space, to present to God a place external to ourselves as well as a space within **to be** in the middle of all that is happening in our own lives and the lives of people around the world.

First, a story from East Africa. It is a story of some Maasai people. The Maasai are nomadic people who move about mostly in Kenya and Tanzania. They are tall, colourful, striking people. I remember seeing some Maasai warriors, sitting down watching a James Bond movie in Dodoma and thoroughly enjoying it!

The Maasai travel from place to place, settling in one location temporarily before it is time to move on. When they move, they take with them only one thing: their cows, which are considered sacred.

One day, some Christian missionaries from Europe decided that the Maasai people needed to hear the gospel. And so, the missionaries came to the land of the Maasai and did what they traditionally did: they built a church. They told the Maasai that the church building was an important place to come and worship God.

The Maasai people were excited, and they came to church. They worshipped and celebrated and knew God. But, when it was time for the nomadic Maasai to leave this location, they left this place of worship behind and wandered into the desert to find a new place to call home and feed their cattle. The Christian missionaries were confused, and wondered what had happened. Didn't the Maasai people like this church? How could they leave it behind so easily?

The missionaries searched until they found the same group of Maasai people again, living in a new place. The relieved missionaries built a new church there and invited the Maasai to come. For a time, the Maasai people came and worshipped and celebrated and knew God. But, one day, the Maasai left their new place of worship and wandered into the desert again to find a new home. This time the missionaries were upset. They had now built two churches that the Maasai had walked away from. The Maasai seemed happy to be in church: why would they leave it for the desert?

The missionaries looked around again until they found the new location where the Maasai were now living. And, for the **first time**, they asked the Maasai why they kept leaving the church house. Wasn't God's house important to them? Didn't they respect the church?

And, for the **first time**, the Maasai responded. They said they loved God and they were excited about God's promises. But, they said, they didn't need a

structure in order to worship God. They would always move from place to place. Buildings have never been important to them.

What is important, the Maasai explained, is that they carry God with them in their hearts. And so God's place is always with them. As they move from place to place, they worship God and celebrate when they come together – with great joy in the open land – without a building. They carry symbols in their minds, God in their hearts, and celebrate their place in God's household.

Then, the Maasai asked the missionaries, "If God is always with you, why is a church building so important?" (*Seasons of the Spirit Congregational Life Pentecost 1*).

Good question.

How might you, as an urban reasonably settled Christian reply?

I think I would thank them for their challenge and insight and say, for me, a church building is a symbol, a reminder of God's presence in the urban landscape. It is a place to gather, to worship, to pray, to play. It is a holy space, an icon, set aside for God ..... and much, much more.

I would wonder, how does this church building shape the way we relate to each other and to God? We are not in the open plains of Tanzania or even western NSW.

Focussing on the diagonal, this church building is wide and open, with lots of windows to the outside world. It is light and warm and colourful – containing works of art from children and adults. It is multipurpose – catering for people of all ages. It is safe. There is a place to light candles. There is a focus on the sanctuary.

I do wonder whether it would be helpful to have one room, or a small section of this space dedicated to quiet prayer, a chapel where people can come any time to pray? Could the sanctuary perhaps be used for that?

The image of God here is one of intimacy, light and community. Does anything need to change? What is essential? How would we set up the space if we were in a school hall again? The Maasai have got me thinking.

We have a building, a visible symbol – and we also carry God in our hearts.

We too, are symbols, reminders of God's presence in this world. We create space to gather, to worship, to pray, to play. We are holy people – set aside for God. Yet people who need reminders, who need special people and places to help us focus on the divine – churches, caves, a labyrinth, a certain chair in your house, a quiet room, a chapel, a meditation group, bible study, EFM, a dinner group, a coffee with someone, holy communion, a waterfall, a lake, mountains ..... the list is endless .....

'We are God's dwelling place', we read, 'temples of the Holy Spirit'.

Let's look back at David to explain further.

David was now established as King, based in Jerusalem. After the return of the Ark of the Covenant, arriving with such joy and excitement, David now decides it is time to build a temple – a place for God - a permanent home for the Ark of the Covenant. His chief political adviser, prophet Nathan – thinks this seems a good idea .....

So the plans are to move ahead. But Nathan has second thoughts, on reflection through prayer, he hears God say something else – God says “No” this is not the time. “I have been with you and moved about, I've never asked for a specific place” .... the answer is “No”, I will not be contained like this – however..... I will continue to be with you and your descendents and your people – this temple building is a job for your son, not you. The answer is “No”.

What a response.

As usual, God doesn't respond in expected ways – God is not boxed by our expectations. God promises to be with – God's people ..... How often do you hear God say “No” to a project? A door seems to close, and another opens .....

David's understanding of God is broadened. David's vision of place comes ??? from his position as King – and his vision grows and changes. Jesus' perspective includes the highways and byways .....

As we explore our place here in Jamison, in Canberra – we do well to carry David's story, and the story of the Maasai with us ..... to notice how do we reflect God in this place? How do we create space to be present to God, wherever we are – we who are God's dwelling place? .....

July 23, 2006: God's Place from Phil Hoffmann (found at [spiritualsightings.com](http://spiritualsightings.com))

What or where is the place in which people discover or feel close to God? Many people state a belief in God. In the Australian Community Survey, three out of every four people surveyed (74%) readily claim their belief in “God or a spirit, higher power, or life-force,” and nearly half of these (35% of the total) describe this as faith in “a personal God.” Yet, only 18% of all Australians attend worship on anything approaching a regular basis. Four in five (80%) have no relationship with organised religion at all. Why do people seemingly not look to the church as the place in which they can explore or develop whatever faith they hold?

The Uniting Church in Australia considered this challenge at its national assembly in Brisbane this month. Assembly leader, President Reverend Gregor Henderson, noted what the survey figures bear out: “While many people are interested in pursuing a spiritual quest and in Jesus, they are not

always so interested in the institutional trappings ..... The critical question in this context is how to assist people on that journey in ways that are helpful.”

The document encourages “the growth of faith communities and spiritual formation in non-traditional settings such as schools, community service agencies, and work places.” It recognises that many people have an association with the church and its faith in places other than worship centres; for example, in aged care facilities, hospitals, community centres, and missions. “If the church failed to provide opportunities for faith development outside its own formal structures,” Henderson said, “people would go elsewhere or miss the opportunity to come to faith altogether.”

David wants to build a place for God to “live in.” What do you think God wants to build?

Where is the “place” you go most often to experience the presence of God?  
- Jesus?

..... café ..... church .....?