

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

Pitch Your Tent In Jacob

The image of the tent keeps appearing in the Scriptures. This means we can never forget that the Bible is the book of a nomadic people, and not the fruit of a settled civilisation, a people rooted in farms or housed in buildings. It's remarkable that, even when they did settle in "the Promised Land" - that is, the land *God* had promised - it never really entered the national soul. True, they did their best to be settlers: they attached the names of the patriarchs to various places and kept them as sanctuaries; they named the regions of the country after different tribes; they took on farms and built cities. But somehow it was an uneasy fit. They knew that their soul was made in the wilderness, not in the city. Freemasons may think God is an Architect, but Israelites know he is a Shepherd. The other trappings of nationhood never worked for Israel. Solomon was their most powerful leader, but in the end even he left behind the wisdom of his ancestors and became lost in the religion of the nations; because unlike David, who had been born the youngest of a large family of shepherds, Solomon had been brought up in a palace. David had fought with wild beasts to save his flock. Solomon was bred to fight only in power politics. Though few dared to say so at the time, Solomon made Israel like the other nations, and therefore he was the one who built the Temple. David was tempted to, but God sent him the prophet Nathan to warn him off. Now, I don't think Solomon would have listened to Nathan.

The Temple - A Sign Of Contradiction

Although the Jerusalem Temple was built with the full involvement of all the forces of the nation, there was a contradiction at its heart. David had actually been forbidden to build it by God, and it stood condemned as an assault on God's holiness, that a man should attempt to "house" God. In his famous promise to David God tells him: *It is I who will make you a House* - that is, a dynasty. A later hand inserts the phrase: *Your son will make me a house*. But this is an act of political laundering. The original, religious impulse was *not* to build a Temple - because God is not to be confined in a human structure: *the heavens themselves are too low to contain him, and the heavens above the heavens*. The one sign of grace in the story is that, within the three concentric courts of the vast structure stood the Holy of Holies, only entered once a year by the single figure of the High Priest. There, at the apex of the

utmost earthly magnificence the kings could contrive, the secret in the heart of Israel, stood the sign of God's mysterious dwelling among his people: *the Tent of Meeting*. Delicate, amid the marble courts, transient, portable, the dwelling, not of a homeless person - one who cannot find a place to stay - but of one whose interest it is always to be mobile, never impeded, never confined. The commitment of a nomad is to the freedom of the journey, not to the permanence of place. The heart of the God of Israel, it says, is nomadic, as was Abraham.

He Pitched His Tent Among Us

How wonderful that John chooses this image for the climax of his great hymn to the Incarnate Word! How marvellously closely the images converge, of the Tent and the Word! Both seem weak and vulnerable; but for God, they share a power to endure which Solomon and Herod the Great could not give to their Temple. Over and again we humans try to build things that will stay the course. Generation after generation we find ourselves contradicted by the truth. In Advent we read the words: *All flesh is grass; the grass withers, the flower fades: but the Word of our God remains forever*. All our strength and stability is transient; the weakness of a word, if it comes from God, is eternal.

Incarnation

But now *the Word became flesh, and pitched his tent among us*. In that miraculous moment our awful transience was shot through with eternity: and *we saw his glory*. Eternity, of course, belongs to God, and not to us; glory is not at our command. But when God reaches out to us, the little, fragile tent of our nature becomes the eternal dwelling-place of the Most High. This is the cause of our Christmas happiness, when even the tinsel and the lights can reflect a glory beyond time and death, space and loss. Christ comes into the narrow space where our slight lives must be lived, and we are transformed. Glory be to God!
Fr Philip