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House-building

2 Samuel 7:1–14a (Proper 11[16])

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Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it!

King David had only just brought the ark of the covenant up to Jerusalem, had only just set it up in a tent pitched in the royal back garden. For YHWH had chosen the ark as His cathedra, where He would sit enthroned on the wings of carved cherubim. Proximity to YHWH was, is, and ought to be a matter for caution. For the reality of Godhead is so other, so far outclasses what any creature is or could be, that we are radically mismatched. Our capacities to act and interact, to do and suffer are geared to other creatures. What we are isn't obviously robust enough to withstand naked traffic with the Divine. That's why earlier, in the days of Moses and Aaron, God had handed down liturgical rubrics, costumes, furniture, rules and regulations as a shield and a covering to make it safe for humans to approach the Holy with prayers and presents. When the Philistines had captured the ark, YHWH had 'broken out' on them and caused tumours. When the oxen had stumbled, and Uzzah – who was neither priest nor Levite – had stretched out his hand to steady the ark – with a liturgically unauthorized gesture – YHWH had 'broken out' on him and struck him dead. It was only when YHWH's presence prospered the farmer in whose field the ark had been left, that David felt confident about bringing the ark up to the city and installing it in his royal chapel.

The books of Samuel make David out to be a YHWH-enthusiast. His ecstatic, virtually naked dancing before the Lord in the sight of all the people had thoroughly scandalized David's first wife. David's devotion to YHWH was not merely calculating or sychophantic, but it did not fail to be political. It had taken David years to move from the margins – from following the sheep, from killing Goliath and entering Saul's service, from eluding assassination, from wandering as a guerilla warrior among the hills, sometimes raiding, sometimes killing for hire – to the centre of power, to kingship over Israel and Judah. At last, David was settling down, had built himself a house of cedar. For YHWH to dwell in a tent, sends the message that YHWH is still a nomad, restless to roam. David wants YHWH to settle down and become part of the establishment. Little wonder if David exclaims, 'Why don't I, surely shouldn't I build YHWH a house?'

Unless the Lord builds the house, they labour in vain who build it!

Of all people, we twenty-first century Europeans and North Americans should know how institutions bear the fruit of many and great goods. Not only do they foster stability; by defining roles and organizing us socially, they create new possibilities for action, new foci of endeavour that wouldn't exist without them. Certainly this is true in education. The cultures of academic research in which investigators participate – the degrees we pursue, the journals in which we publish, the questions we ask and the methodologies by which we answer them – are all institutional artifacts, without which the native brilliance of singular scholars would express itself in very different forms. Likewise with church and government. Whatever binding ties we may feel with Peter and Paul, with Columba or Aidan, with King James (V)I or early parliamentarians, our projects and discoveries, our clerical offices and honorific titles, our human rights manifestos and ethical injunctions mean something different, because the institutions that house us are so different in such distant places and times.

God knows, institutions not only order and organize; they stifle. What defines, also confines. With royalty and religion, ritual etiquette domesti-

cates queen or deity, by furnishing script and stage directions, by tying them down to formulaic expressions, fixed gestures, and prescribed seating arrangements. God knows, institutions can imprison potentates, bind free spirits by drawing too tight a circle around what they can do. David's urge to build YHWH a house flirts with the proposition that YHWH might become David's servant, a highly placed courtier bending His supranatural power to David's designs.

Unsurprisingly, YHWH the chaos-conquerer, Red-Sea-parter, prophet-possesser, king-maker and dynasty-breaker, will have none of this. 'I AM WHO I AM is unconfinable. No house in creation can contain me. I AM cosmic architect and construction worker. No house can stand unless its builder and maker is God!' Refusing to yield the initiative, YHWH counter-proposes to build David a house, reassures him with an unconditional promise of everlasting dynasty, of flourishing in exchange for obedience, of love for David that will never die. David is not permitted to seize YHWH's role as house-builder, but David seems to get what he wants, more than he would have dared to ask. Or does he?

Unless … what if the Lord builds the house?

YHWH builds David's house. But we all know – we've read ahead in the Bible stories – how this proved compatible with the division of the kingdom after Solomon, the downfall of the northern kingdom to the Assyrians and the southern kingdom to the Babylonians; with the conquest of the whole thing by the Greeks and then – after a brief Maccabean interlude – domination by the Romans. By contrast, the New Testament insists, YHWH's love for David was expressed in God's becoming a member of David's family; YHWH's promise of everlasting dynasty was kept in the reign of Christ crucified Who has ascended far above the heavens to fill all things. Jesus is *not* the greater son the David of II Samuel would have expected; cosmic kingship is different from what David could have asked or imagined.

David's story confronts us with a disturbing fact. We invest ourselves deeply in institutions that shape the meaning and purpose of our lives. Building them up, securing their survival is a way of making our existence worthwhile in the present, of continuing to be relevant even after we go down to the grave. But even if we succeed, especially if these institutions persist for generations and centuries, their meaning and purpose will shift in ways that are impossible for us to predict and beyond our power to control. There is no easy algorithm connecting donor intentions with later realities. Nor does this necessarily involve any cynical twisting of last wills and testaments. More often than not, it is creative evolution in the face of new circumstances.

So also and all the more so, the gap between Divine providence and human stewardship, between what we mean and what God purposes. It is the Lord who builds the house, and God's ways are higher than our ways. If we cannot see as God sees and plan as God plans, how can we get our bearings for responsible action? How can we make sure that what seems good or right to us will fall within the scope of what God has in mind?

Like us, David puts in a decidedly mixed performance. Nevertheless, his career gets into the bible because it offers us a significant clue. The most important thing about David was not his good looks and rugged virility. It was rather that being loved by God and loving God back were more important to David than his own horizontal fortunes and institutional aims. Put otherwise in twenty-first-century jargon, David's personal identity was not socially constructed all the way down. The meaning and purpose of his life were rooted and grounded in his lop-sided friendship with YHWH. This freed David not to turn kingdom and kingship into idols, enabled him to wait to win, to enjoy what he had while he had it, and to lose without despair.

For David, kingship meant wealth and turf, power and harems. David had to work to secure his position, mostly by fighting and winning wars. Yet, even within his own horizon, David regarded kingdom and kingship neither as things to be seized, grasped, and held onto at all costs; nor as anything to which he was personally entitled. Rather – for the David of the books of Samuel – kingdom and kingship rightfully belong to God, were YHWH's gifts to be awarded in YHWH's good time.

Because David believed himself befriended by God, he was able to respect the sacred in others, to be generous to his own worst enemies. Despite Saul's determination to kill David, David refuses to lay a hand on the Lord's anointed, twice spares Saul's life. David does not exact the full measure of vengeance on individual enemies, because – when David sinned – God was merciful, YHWH did not cease to love him.

Confidence in God's friendship turns easily into the playing God, into the tragi-comedy and comi-tragedy of rulers and nation states asserting Divine right to lord it over others. We have only to open the newspapers (go to academic or ecclesial committee meetings) to recognize messianic pretenders, forwarding themselves as the Lord's anointed, presuming that a Divine seal of approval stamps everything they say and do. Except for the flirtation with house-building, David showed remarkable resistance to this temptation. David's sensitivity to the yawning size-gap between Divine and human perspectives shows itself in his readiness to accept correction. Because David was prepared to repent, God endowed even David's terrible mistakes (e.g., his murderous adultery with Bathsheba) with surprising positive meanings – according to Matthew's Gospel traced Jesus' legal descent through Solomon's line.

And so, ironically, true love for our institutions requires us to hold them like a thistle, to hold them but not too tightly, to identify ourselves with them but not too closely, to recognize that we and they have a transcendent ground!

Unless the Lord builds the house, we labour in vain!

BEING MADE DIVINE?

Norman Russell, *The Doctrine of Deification in the Greek Patristic Tradition* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2004. £70.00. pp. xiv + 418. ISBN 0–199–26521–6).

First distilled as a doctoral thesis in 1988, the contents of this monograph appear to have aged well. Eschewing the often observed but artificial boundaries between the study of the Bible and the study of the Fathers, Russell offers an account of the development of the concept of deification in the Greek-speaking church from Jewish antecedents through metaphorical beginnings to it later doctrinal development in patristic and Byzantine theology.

A significant change takes place at the end of the fourth century, he argues, prior to which deification had been understood metaphorically in two different ways. One, based on Paul's teaching of incorporation into Christ through baptism, Russell characterizes as realistic (i.e., pertaining to the transformation of human life when lived in relation to God, and made possible by the incarnation, as seen especially in Irenaeus). The other, typical of Clement of Alexandria and the Cappadocians, and fundamentally Platonic in nature, he characterizes as philosophical and ethical. Both strands come together by the end of the fourth century, but undergo significant development at a later stage when Byzantine controversies cause the experiential side of deification to be emphasized and other understandings to be excluded. It was in this form, he argues, that the doctrine of deification was handed on to the Orthodox Church of today.

Drawing on a wide range of primary and secondary material, not least a number of recent studies on the doctrine of deification in individual Fathers, Russell offers a balanced and nuanced overview of his topic, noting different ways in which the language of deification was used. He pays careful attention both to the problems that each writer was addressing when he wrote or spoke of deification, and also to the vocabulary that he used, and presents the results of this lexical analysis in the first of two appendices. (In the other he summarizes the teaching of Syriac and Latin Fathers on deification.)

Russell is fully aware not only of western (especially Protestant) objections to the doctrine of deification, but also of polemical defences by orthodox theologians. He does not address these debates head-on, however, although his careful attention to the New Testament may go some way to addressing some of the concerns that Protestants have raised, and his distinction between earlier patristic understandings of deification and later Byzantine expressions may offer helpful material for ecumenical discussion. Thus, although primarily a historical study, the monograph does not ignore contemporary theological concerns.

Nor does Russell refrain from offering his readers direct spiritual application: 'The true fulfilment of our humanity is expressed by the doctrine of theosis ["deification"], which teaches us how, by sharing in the divine sonship of Christ with all that that implies in ecclesial and ascetical terms, our identity can be redefined as "gods by grace" destined to be transformed by divine glory through participation in the triadic fullness of life'.

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