

Commentary on the Gospel for Thu, Aug 1st 2013

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord, mighty God!

In chapter 40 of Exodus, from which the first readings come, we hear “the Lord” giving Moses detailed instructions on how to “set up the tabernacle of the tent of meeting.” The instructions include the placement of the ark of the covenant, curtains, lampstands, and bread as well as the use of incense, water, anointing oil, and the washing of feet. The instructions are very clear that this structure of meeting is to be a tent. A tent that could and would be dismantled and taken with the Israelites “on each stage of their journey.”

Lovely? How lovely could this tent have been? Think of the temples, churches, and mosques built over the ages. St Sophia in Istanbul, Turkey, the Blue Mosque also in Istanbul. St Peter’s in Vatican City, Rome, Italy, the Mormon tabernacle in Salt Lake City, Utah to name a few.

What is it about these meeting structures that attract thousands of visitors a year? Not their simplicity nor their portability. The structures are awesome buildings of inspiring craftsmanship and artistry. They are rich with mosaics, wooden carvings, marble statuary, magnificent stain glass windows and in many cases are part of significant events in history. They are incredible works of art.

What is it I take with me from these sites of unimaginable artistry?

I don’t recall the crafted beauty of the cathedral in Chicago, although I am sure there is some. What I recall is the noontime Eucharistic gathering: well-heeled women clutching shopping bags, suited businessmen, flip-flopped students with backpacks casually slung over one shoulder, the occasional tourists, and a group of elderly women softly murmuring the rosary. And, there were the locals – the homeless, the street dwellers, the lost and forsaken, the outcast. The fearful hiding in dark corners, the weary asleep on worn wooden pews, couples huddling together. Each one filthy, tattered and smelly. Bodies and hair that had not seen a brush or comb much less soap, water or toothbrush in who knows how long. I saw them. I remember them. Few in number, yet present each in his/her own way. Each one essential to the artistry of the meeting place, to the faith community, even if that was not their intention.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord...

I remember attending early morning Mass in a tiny stone, cold church in a small French village. Weary bent-over women wrapped in black shawls from head to toe. Old knees throbbing on stone-cold floors. The not-so-gracefully aged priest struggling to kneel at the simple marble altar rail. The hockey puck size hole in the bottom of his right shoe was un-missable. There was no hiding the threadbare sock. Above the altar of this worn down old shoe of a church graced a faded, hardly visible fresco of the risen Christ –arms outstretched in welcome.

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord...

The good news: In a tent, on a lake shore, in a prison, in a home, on a grassy hillside – wherever and whoever the faithful gather in prayer...

How lovely is your dwelling place, O Lord, mighty God.

Joan Blandin Howard