

God on the move

II Samuel 7:1-14; Mark 6:30-34,53-56

When I was at Primary School a million years ago there used to be something called 'Music and Movement'. Nearly always after lunch, when you didn't feel much like moving. Some posh lady from the BBC urging us to reach and stretch like the tallest sunflowers on our tippy-tippy tiptoes; or, on one memorable to this 6 year old, the occasion when we were to bury ourselves deep, deep into the darkest, darkest tunnel like a velvety mole-y-woley. A Joyce Grenfell meets Siegfried Freud moment. The idea, of course, was to get us on the move. As well, subtly, to introduce impressionable children to lighter classical music.

The idea of being on the move can be a bit of a love-hate thing. Nobody likes being stuck in a rut, but we all like our familiar home-comforts around us. Having adventures and exploring new horizons is balanced by the thought that 'there's no place like home.'

David has established his kingdom and united it. He has brought together the warring factions amongst the tribes of Israel and seen off their enemies. He has founded a new capital city, Jerusalem. He has remembered the God of Israel. He has danced, in his excitement, at the nearness of God. And then he remembered that the God of Israel had no permanent home, whereas he, David, lived in a palace.

What kind of a house should God live in? What woodwork and stonework, what glass and metalwork, what gold and silver and rubies and diamonds and emeralds and all the expensive beauty of the world would be fit enough for a house to house God? What fabrics and textiles would you use? Who would do the flowers?

In our own lives the question of housing is crucial. Shelter is essential to our survival as a species. The quality and safety of our homes matters. We need a roof over our heads. It is why the ongoing refugees crisis around the Mediterranean and at ports like Calais unsettle us and make us more than anxious. It is why seeing people in our streets who clearly have nowhere to live, for whatever reason, challenges us to think why, and what we might do about it, like the Bethany Charity we support.

David sees God homeless, carried around in a box from place to place. Surely God should be in something grand, permanent, glorious?

God says 'no'. God is on the move. Temples will rise and fall. Synagogues and churches come and go. But God is on the move.

Every time we try to pin God down, or box God up, God is on the move. Every time we say, "This is what God is like, and this is how God will stay", God is on the move.

It's wonderful. It's frightening. It's unsettling. It's glorious. God on the move.

However much we try to contain God in a box, or a building, or in stained glass windows, or church furniture, or communion cups, or pieces of music, or doctrine and practice and tradition and history and attitudes, God is on the move. I have often wondered whether that makes God absolute or relative. But it certainly makes God impossible to pin down and define. That was attempted at Calvary on a wooden cross and afterwards in a stone tomb, and God got out of that too.

God is on the move. From the first verses of the Bible, where God is on the move over the face of the unformed world, through walking in the Garden of Eden in the cool of the day; to the

journey with old Abraham through deserts to a Promised Land; to Moses and the Israelites through the wilderness out of Egypt; to Elijah in his lonely cave hearing the voice of God moving nearby in a whisper. God is on the move.

In Jesus God keeps on moving. Journeys too and from Bethlehem at the nativity. Flight to Egypt; return to Mary's home-town Nazareth; travelling round the lakeside; walking over the waters of Galilee; up and down mountains and to lonely places; on the road to Jerusalem and into the courts of Herod and the High Priests and Pilate; through the city streets carrying a cross; into a stone tomb, and out of it again. God is on the move in Jesus.

And whenever God is on the move in Jesus, God encounters people. When God is on the move in Jesus, whether in the heart of things or out there on the fringes where nobody much goes, God in Jesus, on the move, encounters people. Usually people in need. Usually people not too sure about what they wanted or needed; usually people everyone else had walked away from, but here, on the fringes on the outskirts of life, these sheep without a shepherd encountered Jesus, God on the move. It's no surprise that one of the names given to Jesus in Matthew's story of Jesus' birth is Emmanuel, 'God with us'.

God is on the move. God has to be on the move because God is seeking people out. God is looking for those who are tired, afraid, doubting, angry, isolated, grieving, lost. Some of those may have found their way to a Temple, but not all; some of those may have found their way to Church, but not all.

It remains one of the great opportunities, and great challenges, for all faith communities today. Yes, we want people to come to Church, and become involved, and share in the things that we do and things that we like. Sometimes they will surprise us, and manage to make it here on a Sunday morning! But for those others, not so sure, not so interested, might it be that what we

are being called to do is to find ways to get out there to them, and tell them about the things that we are doing, or better than that, invite them to something. Not with any expectations on our part, but simply being the agents of a God Who is on the move, out there in our community.

Last week I went to Saughton Park where a group of churches in that part of Edinburgh had put up a big tent. During the day they organised activities for children; at night-time there were events for families. Some old ideas, some new ones, it was well-attended, but for all the people inside the tent, there were many sitting outside. They were watching, they were interested, but they were not sure. Was what was going on 'for the likes of them' – as one lady said to me as she watched the coming and going. "Don't you have to be, like, a Christian, to get in?" she asked.

I wonder if the people passing this building ask the same question. Is it for the likes of them? What do you have to believe to come in? What's expected of you? What's not expected of you?

In all of that I find myself asking, where is God? Where is this God on the move in our community, amongst all of those people out there? The people who are uncertain about coming in, and finding out, just in case they're judged, or made to feel unwelcome, or something else that has built up for whatever reason in their misconceptions about a Church, and what it does, and what it is.

It is not that God isn't on the move within this Church. God is. But that same God is also on the move in our community, and within our city, and within our country. And that same God is seeking to find ways for those inside the Church to meet up with those outside the Church, to learn from each other, and to share with each other. Where those inside and outside the church see only walls to keep people in, or out, God sees only windows and doors through which God moves, to reach the people on both sides. God sees know 'them and us'; only 'us.'

There **are** times when people need shelter, and sanctuary, and safe places in which to find help and hope and catch their breath. There are times when people need to gather to celebrate, or learn, or mourn, or work together for a good cause that makes the world a better place. May this continue to be such a place, where God is on the move, in our worship, in our service, in our encountering Jesus.

But there are also times when the people of this place need to go out, once more, beyond these walls. Back to family and friends. Back to neighbours and colleagues, taking with us what we have encountered here – the blessing, the love, the questions, the support, the encouragement – and find that as we go out into the world – our God – on the move – goes with us – before us – helping us bring the encounter of Jesus to the people we meet through what we say and do.

God on the move is not trapped inside this church box; God on the move is not shut outside this church box. But God **is** on the move, bringing about encounters, meeting people on the edges and at the heart of things, and bringing blessing wherever He goes. To us; to everyone.

It's wonderful. It's frightening. It's unsettling. It's glorious. God on the move. Get ready to meet Him!

In the Name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit.

Amen