

Monday February 22nd: Bezalel and Oholiab: [Exodus 31 v 1-11](#): ‘See I have chosen...’



Back in the 1990s I remember visiting the (now defunct) Waterford Crystal plant in Ireland. I was very struck by the fact that becoming a glass blower or cutter (you had to decide which you wanted to be – one or the other rather than both – at the beginning of your training) required an eight year apprenticeship. This sounded far-fetched but seeing the quality (and price) of the finished items for sale in the shop at the end of the tour, the immense skill of such

expert craftspeople was on display for all to see.

It's lovely and very significant that the book of Exodus pays tribute to the wonderful God given skills of Bezalel and Oholiab. The Tent of Meeting, which they were so instrumental in beautifying, was a sort of mobile worship space that, as the Israelites moved around in the wilderness, could be packed up and carried with them. It housed the Ark of the Covenant, containing the Ten Commandments written on stone tablets, and was the place in which the presence of God was localised; in that sense being a portable precursor to the Jerusalem Temple.

Bezalel, Oholiab and their colleagues were able to make it into a very beautiful space which greatly enhanced the sense of God's presence within. They had a pretty wide remit that included the decoration of the Tent of Meeting, the Ark of the Covenant itself, everything necessary for sacrificial offerings to be made and the garments worn by the priests. We can imagine them working together to create somewhere wonderful for the worship of God. It puts me a little in mind of the television programme DIY SOS in which tradesmen of all kinds; bricklayers, plasterers, joiners, plumbers, electricians, landscape gardeners and many others come together to give their time and skills to create a beautiful home for family with particular needs who are not able to help themselves. In their hard hats and heavy boots they are using their considerable gifts and expertise to create a space in which a family can live and thrive. I don't think that Bezalel, Oholiab and their colleagues had hard hats or hobnail boots and they used far more primitive tools than their latter-day counterparts, but they produced something of immense beauty that worked powerfully on those who came there to worship.

The church buildings we worship in, whether they are ancient or modern were all built to enhance Christian worship. Stonemasons, glass blowers and cutters, carpenters, joiners, artists, needle workers, candle makers and many other craftspeople have beautified our churches. In that sense they continue to minister to members of church families across the world who sing, pray, share bread and wine and have fellowship in them (when there isn't a pandemic). For instance, the art of creating stained glass is an amazing skill. Whether dating from ancient or modern times, it is there to tell stories and express profound truths in a way that words cannot. For example, the panels in the 13th century Sainte-Chappelle in Paris depict over a thousand figures from the Old and New

Testaments reflecting the need for visual storytelling in an era where few people could read. But I also vividly remember being struck by a depiction of the astronaut John Glenn in Grace Cathedral in San Francisco, built in the 20th century, which powerfully symbolised the basic and God given human yearning for exploration and discovery. What Bezalel, Oholiab and their latter-day colleagues are able to do is transcend words as they open hearts and imaginations to the reality of God's love and the transformation of humanity that results from responding to it.

We read in Exodus 31 of Bezalel that God had '...filled him with the Spirit of God, with skill, ability and knowledge...' (v 3). A few verses further on God declares, with reference to Oholiab and those working with him, that 'I have given ability to all the skilled workers...' (v 6). Although it might be tempting to see gifts such as these as more natural than spiritual that would be a big mistake. Whether worship is taking place in an ancient tabernacle or a modern church it is not just the leaders 'up front' who using God's gifts. In Paul's list of spiritual gifts alongside such things as teaching and healing we find other qualities such as administrative abilities that on the surface might seem more mundane (1 Corinthians 12 v 28).

Continuing this line of thought reminds us that every human being has been given gifts by God. And whilst some of them, such as preaching, teaching, offering pastoral care and leading worship as well as administration and creating stained glass windows, are specifically for use in church, there are so many more! Some are gifted technicians, sportspeople, cooks, engineers, school teachers, doctors, nurses, designers, artists, plasterers, decorators, builders, cleaners, woodworkers, organisers, listeners, carers, encouragers and gardeners, to name but a very few of many. Everything we are and all we can do is a gift from God to us and through us to others. And the great thing is that each of us has something unique to offer. In an age that idolises fame it's easy to feel that we are useless and have nothing of any value to contribute. But Bezalel, Oholiab and their unnamed colleagues remind us that God is no respecter of persons and inspires those gifted people who work quietly in the background and just get on with it without asking for their names to be up in lights. What is it that you uniquely have to offer? It may even be something you haven't discovered yet!

Questions: Do we sometimes feel useless? What is the antidote?

Prayer: Lord, you have given so many gifts to humanity. Help us to use the gifts you give us for the good of others and the growth of your kingdom. Amen.