

I was saying to the congregation at the 10.15 this morning that we are now into the dying weeks of an old Christian year. And in the Western Church, where the close of the year coincides with the cooling of the days and the drawing in of the night, our readings start to point us towards those key biblical themes of what is transient, or disposable, or temporary; and, on the other hand, that which is eternal. Which will last forever. And how we shape our Christian lives in that light.

This evening's readings direct us towards those sorts of thoughts. If you've been at Evensong regularly over the past few weeks you will be getting used to hearing Nehemiah being read. Just to remind ourselves, these two books of the Old Testament, Ezra and Nehemiah, tell the story of what happens when the Jewish people are allowed back to their homeland after their period in exile. And these two men, Ezra and Nehemiah, are key organisers and leaders in rebuilding the temple and re-establishing the pattern of Jewish life and worship after a long period of disruption. And last Sunday we heard the story of the walls of the temple being finally rebuilt, the last gaps being closed up.

Tonight we hear about the people keeping the festival of Booths, or the Festival of Tabernacles, for the first time for a long time. They are re-establishing their identity. And what they are doing is sort of keeping their harvest festival. This is a festival of thanksgiving to God, amongst other things for God's bountiful provision, his provision of food, of sustenance. But it has lots of other strains as well. And one really important one is indicated by this practice of building booths. We heard about that in this evening's first reading didn't we?

Why would the people build booths, tents, temporary structures, maybe the most appropriate English word would be bivouack,

why would they build these shelters on the roofs of their houses and live in them, rather than inside where it is almost certainly drier, warmer and more comfortable? Well, it is because this festival is an important reminder that God provides for his people always. Even when they are homeless. Even when they are journeying. And these tents, these shelters, are a reminder of the shelters that the children of Israel lived in during their journey through the wilderness, during those 40 years when they were on their way from Egypt to the promised land. Even now, coming back to their land, rebuilding their physical temple, what the people do is remember that none of those things, in the end, are a measure of how much God loves you. God always provides, even when it feels like we have nothing.

And those verses from John's gospel this evening are pointing us in the same direction. Jesus is about to be betrayed, crucified and buried. The disciples are going to lose his physical presence with them. And what does he want to say to them: God is always going to be with you. The Holy Spirit is coming. You are not abandoned.

The message this evening, as the evening closes in on us, as the weather turns and the leaves drop, and the darkness asserts itself once again, is that there is an absolutely unbreakable promise that we are never alone. That we can cry out to God, as the choir just sang, "Hear my prayer O God, incline thine ear", and God *will* hear, and God *will* incline his ear. And God will teach us to live, that we may dread the grave as little as our bed. And to die that so we may rise glorious at the awful Day.

Eternal promises, from our Eternal God who is none the less as close to us as anything ever can be. Amen.