



The Round Church at
St Andrew the Great
Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 5th November 2006
by Mark Ashton

10p

1 Kings 9:10–10:29

A glimpse of glory

We have been looking at King Solomon for five weeks now in our morning sermons and today we reach the highest point in the reign of Israel's greatest king, in chapter 10. But we reach that climax slowly through what I have called:

(1) The routine stuff of kingship (9:10-28)

Here we see Solomon, the politician, dealing with his neighbour, Hiram, King of Tyre (vv10-14). We see his passion for construction in public works of all sorts, and especially building the country's defences (vv15-19); his administrative skill with his work force, his civil service, and his armed forces (vv20-23); his religious leadership (v25); and his commercial success (vv26-28). It is just what kings in the ancient world did. And it is a story of success. Here is a great king, becoming greater.

But there are a few discordant notes in the general symphony of success. Remember that just before our passage, God had been issuing a most solemn warning to Solomon. Look at how chapter 9 verse 9 ends: *People will answer, "Because they have forsaken the Lord their God, who brought their fathers out of Egypt, and have embraced other gods, worshipping and serving them—that is why the Lord brought all this disaster on them."* Is that a hint of what may yet happen?

Then, King Hiram is far from pleased with how Solomon dealt with him, although he does not dare to do more than whinge a bit in verse 13: *"What kind of towns are these you have given me, my brother?" he asked. And he called them the Land of Cabul, a name they have to this day.* Clearly, Solomon is the dominant partner in their alliance. But do we wonder what he thinks he is up to in ceding twenty towns from God's promised land to

a foreign ruler?

Then there is another little under-current concerning the land's original inhabitants, whom Israel were supposed to have wiped out: *All the people left from the Amorites, Hittites, Perizzites, Hivites and Jebusites (these peoples were not Israelites), that is, their descendants remaining in the land, whom the Israelites could not exterminate—these Solomon conscripted for his slave labour force, as it is to this day* (vv20-21). 'Could not'? or 'would not'? for the sake of the building programme? we wonder. After all, Pharaoh found it easy enough: *Pharaoh king of Egypt had attacked and captured Gezer. He had set it on fire. He killed its Canaanite inhabitants and then gave it as a wedding gift to his daughter, Solomon's wife* (v15).

Now, the reason those original Canaanite inhabitants were to be exterminated by God's people was so that the Israelites would not intermarry with them and start to worship their gods. So what is all this about Pharaoh's daughter, who keeps cropping up as Solomon's wife. Why, we wonder, has Solomon married her? *After Pharaoh's daughter had come up from the City of David to the palace Solomon had built for her, he constructed the supporting terraces* (v24).

Now, these are slightly ominous features of Solomon's rule. But they don't prevent him growing greater. Note how the one hundred and twenty talents of gold in verse 14 contrast with the four hundred and twenty talents of gold by verse 28. He just gets greater and greater and chapter 10 is really about what I've called:

(2) The splendour and the majesty (10:1-25)

First, the Queen of Sheba bursts upon the scene: you remember her arrival, don't you? Didn't Handel do it well? She was no slouch herself: *Arriving at Jerusalem with a very great caravan—with camels carrying spices, large quantities of gold, and precious stones—she came to Solomon and talked with him about all that she had on her mind. Solomon answered all her questions; nothing was too hard for the king to explain to her* (10:2-3). In fact, she found Solomon overwhelming: *she was overwhelmed. She said to the king, "The report I heard in my own country about your achievements and your wisdom is true. But I did not believe these things until I came and saw with my own eyes. Indeed, not even half was told me; in wisdom and wealth you have far exceeded the report I heard. How happy your men must be! How happy your officials, who continually stand before you and hear your wisdom!"* (vv5c-8). This was wisdom and wealth beyond all natural proportions.

It pointed to God: *"Praise be to the Lord your God, who has delighted in you and placed you on the throne of Israel. Because of the Lord's eternal love for Israel, he has made you king, to maintain justice and righteousness"* (v9). Such blessing could only have a divine explanation (and we considered last week what we learn about our attitude to Jesus from her attitude to Solomon). And then the superlatives continue—look at the end of verse 10: *Never again were so many spices brought in as those the queen of Sheba gave to King Solomon*, and the end of verse 12: *So much almugwood has never been imported or seen since that day*.

And then the climax of Solomon's reign is described in the verses following verse 14 ('gold' is the key word in the passage. It has come six times already since chapter 9 verse 10, but it will come some ten times in the next 12 verses so I've asked the cymbals to mark it out for us): *The weight of the gold that Solomon received yearly was 666 talents, not including the revenues from merchants and traders and from all the Arabian kings and the governors of the land. King Solomon made two hundred large shields of hammered gold; six hundred bekas of gold went into each shield. He also made three hundred small shields of hammered gold, with three*

minas of gold in each shield. The king put them in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon. Then the king made a great throne inlaid with ivory and overlaid with fine gold. The throne had six steps, and its back had a rounded top. On both sides of the seat were armrests, with a lion standing beside each of them. Twelve lions stood on the six steps, one at either end of each step. Nothing like it had ever been made for any other kingdom. All King Solomon's goblets were gold, and all the household articles in the Palace of the Forest of Lebanon were pure gold. Nothing was made of silver, because silver was considered of little value in Solomon's days. The king had a fleet of trading ships at sea along with the ships of Hiram. Once every three years it returned, carrying gold, silver and ivory, and apes and baboons. King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules (vv14-25).

We are meant to be awestruck. Our imagination should be stirred to action by the sumptuousness of the description. Do you know John Masefield's poem, *Cargoes*, its first verse inspired by verse 22?

Quinquereme of Nineveh from distant Ophir
Rowing home to haven in sunny Palestine,
With cargo of ivory
And apes and peacocks
Sandalwood, cedarwood and sweet white
wine

(I'm not sure where he got the sweet white wine from, or the peacocks, but we will allow him poetic licence).

It is a Messianic image here: an ideal kingdom at the centre of the human race, to which all peoples are drawn, not by force of arms, but the evident blessing to be found there: *King Solomon was greater in riches and wisdom than all the other kings of the earth. The whole world sought audience with Solomon to hear the wisdom God had put in his heart. Year after year, everyone who came brought a gift—articles of silver and gold, robes, weapons and spices, and horses and mules* (vv23-25). God's wisdom (to answer all

our questions, solve all our puzzles and soothe our hearts) made available for human beings through God's king. It is a glimpse of how life could be, should be, if only the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune could be dealt with, all suffering, all sorrows, all sin be brought to an end. For a moment, we see the end of all things, God's purpose for his universe, just for a moment. It is a tiny glimpse of Jesus and his kingdom. But, even as the chapter ends, another note is sounding again. I've called this:

(3) The glory and the grief (10:23-29)

Solomon accumulated chariots and horses; he had fourteen hundred chariots and twelve thousand horses, which he kept in the chariot cities and also with him in Jerusalem. The king made silver as common in Jerusalem as stones, and cedar as plentiful as sycamore-fig trees in the foothills. Solomon's horses were imported from Egypt and from Kue—the royal merchants purchased them from Kue. They imported a chariot from Egypt for six hundred shekels of silver, and a horse for a hundred and fifty. They also exported them to all the kings of the Hittites and of the Arameans (vv26-29). It sounds wonderful, even more of Solomon's glory until we recall what the book of Deuteronomy had already said about Israel's king: *The king, moreover, must not acquire a great number of horses for himself or make the people return to Egypt to get more of them, for the Lord has told you, "You are not to go back that way again." He must not take many wives, or his heart will be led astray. He must not accumulate large amounts of silver and gold (Deuteronomy 17:16-17).* Oh dear! There's a sour note.

And it faces us again with the puzzle of these chapters: what verdict are we meant to pass on Solomon? Was he good? or was he bad? We sense that it's all about to go pear-shaped. He has broken all the stipulations for the Israelite king from Deuteronomy 17, bar one (and we are about to hear just over the page how he's broken that one too...and how! Not just many wives, but 700 of them and 300 concubines! The mind boggles! But that's next week's passage).

So what are we to make of this chapter? Is it good news (of a Messiah figure) or bad news (of exploitation, extravagant luxury, decadence and

imminent corruption)? Commentators torture themselves over this issue. And I think we have to let it be both, because in Solomon we see Jesus, and in Solomon we can also see ourselves.

Life is like that. Here on this earth, we only ever catch glimpses of glory. They are there, but they are fleeting. Wordsworth thought we have them when we are young, but lose them as we grow older:

Our birth is but a sleep and a forgetting
The soul that rises with us, our life's star,
Hath had elsewhere its setting,
And cometh from afar:
Not in entire forgetfulness.
And not in utter nakedness
But trailing clouds of glory do we come
From God, who is our home:
Heaven lies about us in our infancy!

Shades of the prison being to close
Upon the growing Boy...

Bertrand Russell thought that human love brought, 'in a mystic miniature, the prefiguring vision of the heaven that saints and poets have imagined' (Prologue to his autobiography).

In different ways and by different means we can all catch glimpses of God's glory now. They are there in the midst of the pain and the tragedy which make up so much of human life. The optimist and pessimist look out on the same world. The optimist proclaims it to be the best of all possible worlds and the pessimist, when he hears him, fears that he may be right. They see two



Figure 1

different things (Figure 1). We must learn to see both. Can you? Some see one, some the other—the good and the evil. Don't let this image mislead you: I'm not advocating a Monist philosophy like Hinduism, where good and evil are just different aspects of the same reality. No.

But we must cultivate the ability to see glimpses of glory, just to be overawed, amazed, gob-smacked by beauty (by natural beauty or by artistic beauty), or by love, or by human virtue. I have often tried to preach sermons that encourage

us to cope with sorrow, pain and suffering. I have not often tried to help us cope with joy and delight and fulfilment and pleasure. But God gives us both. And he means us to benefit from both. There are intimations of immortality all around us. If we can't look on Solomon in all his majesty, and see a glimpse of God's purposes for this world in Jesus Christ, then we are partly blind. We must be ready to see glory.

We must not deny the glory. But nor may we ignore the evil, the sin. Earlier in the book of 1 Kings (in chapter 4) Solomon's wealth had been described in terms of the plentiful supplies of food there were during his reign, and how every person in the kingdom shared in that prosperity. There is none of that now. Chapter 10 is only about the phenomenal luxury of his court. Who knows what deprivation and exploitation and injustice made this indulgence possible?

We are *both* to rejoice at the splendour, *and* to be aware of the injustice. The two are not reconcilable. But we must see them both. Because life is like that: the majesty and the meanness, the delight and the degradation, the glory and grief are never totally separable on this confused and star-struck planet of ours. Inspiring self-sacrifice is rarely far from the selfishness of lust. The greatest achievements of human art and music are all too often fuelled by greed, jealousy and vain ambition. And don't examine too closely the beauties of the natural world, or you may even catch a glimpse of nature red in both tooth and claw (Did you read about that Pelican in St. James Park a couple of weeks ago which ate a pigeon? The children watching were reduced to tears, as it took twenty minutes to swallow it).

Be ready to see the glory, but be ruthless about also seeing sin. There must be no self-deceit, no painting over the cracks, no pretence that this world is a better place than it is, or that we are better people than we are.

We must see both (the good and the evil) and recognise that God alone is the one who will eventually separate the one from the other. Jesus told a parable about the Wheat and the Tares growing together until the harvest-time. Harvest-time will come, and the Judge of all the earth will execute perfect justice on the whole human race. In the meantime, you and I have to cope with a

sin-ravaged earth, where king Solomon can be for us a wonderful pre-figuring of Jesus Christ and of all the blessing He can bring to us; and at the same time Solomon can be for us a dreadful warning of why we dare not follow our hearts and indulge our desires in life without heeding God's word. But that is next week's very non-postmodern passage. Do please come back. I sense this sermon is incomplete without next week's.

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)