

# **‘Concerning This House’: Beauty, Memory, and the Presence of God**

Tatjana Ljujić

Evensong, 26<sup>th</sup> July 2026, 8<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Trinity

*1 Kings 6.11-14, 23-end*

I have been working at Bristol Cathedral for just over a year now, and still, every time I enter this place, I am in awe of its architectural splendour and the beauty created by the many artisans who have shaped it over the centuries. Its stones, windows, and carvings speak of generations of faith, inspiration, skill, and devotion. We rightly cherish this place.

In recent years, however, this Cathedral, like the city it serves, has been looking honestly at its history, particularly the legacy of the Trans-Atlantic slave trade: the trafficking and exploitation of enslaved Africans. Among the memorials here is a window dedicated to Edward Colston (in the north transept; on your right as you leave the quire), who was a benefactor of the city and the Church, but whose wealth was largely derived from the abhorrent trade in human beings.

The magnificent Rose Window above the West door was given in memory of Thomas Daniel, a merchant and one-time mayor of this city, whose fortune was built on slave-labour-powered sugar plantations in the Caribbean. Research undertaken here has identified around two hundred people buried or memorialised in this Cathedral with direct connections to the trade and exploitation of enslaved people.

Some of the Cathedral’s work to address this legacy, including the exhibition *All God’s Children* and plans for a new permanent artwork in dialogue with the Colston window, has met pushback. That pushback has largely rested on the argument that we are imposing modern notions of justice on people who lived in a different time; that we are judging the past by standards it never claimed to hold.

This evening’s reading from the First Book of Kings, however, suggests that the connection between sacred beauty and justice is not a modern import. It was right at the centre of the theological thought surrounding the building of the Temple in Jerusalem.

For generations before the Temple was built, Israel had worshipped God in a portable tent called tabernacle. Now, under Solomon, Israel is a settled kingdom, and the king begins to build a

permanent house for God. The writer of First Kings lingers over its construction: cedar and cypress, carved cherubim, gold on every surface (1 Kings 6.15-22, 29-35). It is a work of extraordinary craftsmanship, and the writer takes the time to delight in every detail — which is rather significant, given the otherwise terse language we often associate with biblical storytelling.

But then the description pauses. And that is where the passage we heard this evening begins. God speaks to Solomon: ‘Concerning this house that you are building, if you will walk in my statutes, obey my ordinances, and keep all my commandments by walking in them, then I will establish my promise with you... I will dwell among the children of Israel, and will not forsake my people Israel’ (1 Kings 6.12-13).

The building is not enough. The beauty is not enough. God’s presence is not secured by visual and architectural splendour alone; it is conditional on how God’s people live. That little word ‘if’ — ‘*if* you will walk in my statutes’ — unsettles the magnificence of the whole project. And I don’t think that unsettling is incidental.

The chapter leading up to this evening’s reading tells us about the labour conscripted for Solomon’s vast building programme (1 Kings 5.13-18). The Hebrew word used here is *mas*, meaning an imposed work levy. It was not slavery in the sense that people were not held in bondage, but it was nonetheless forced labour: the king’s subjects could not refuse it, and they were not paid for it.

The narrator does not immediately address the human cost of the forced labour on which the building of the Temple relied. But that cost will come back to haunt the kingdom. After Solomon’s death, we discover the effect of the forced labour. The people come to his son Rehoboam and say, ‘Your father made our yoke heavy’ (1 Kings 12.4). Rehoboam, rather unwisely, refuses to lighten it, and the kingdom splits in two (1 Kings 12.1-19). It was not the only reason for the split, but it was significant.

So the biblical text itself refuses to let us behold the beauty of the Temple without qualification: the same reign that built one of the great symbols of Israel’s faith also built a burden the people could not carry. And the text does not ask us to choose between ‘Solomon the magnificent Temple-builder’ and ‘Solomon the oppressor’. It asks us to hold both. It also shows that concern for justice was built into God’s covenant with God’s people; it is not a modern sentiment. Long before Solomon, Deuteronomy already places limits on the wealth a king may accumulate (17.14-

20). And the prophets who follow him hammer the same point relentlessly: worship without justice is worthless to God (e.g. Amos 5.21-24; Isaiah 1.11-17; Micah 6.6-8).

The connection between the holiness of a building and the treatment of the people who build it is not something we are reading back into the biblical text. It is the Bible's own argument, made by its own writers, in their own historical contexts.

Nor is disagreement about how to remember the past a modern invention. This evening's reading from Kings is not the only biblical account of the building of Solomon's Temple. The author of Chronicles, writing generations later for a community rebuilding its life after exile, tells the story rather differently. Solomon's rule, which First Kings presents in all its glorious ambiguity, is idealised by the writers of Chronicles. The forced labour question is 'resolved' by claiming that it was foreign residents, not Israelites, who were exploited (2 Chronicles 2.17-18) — as if that makes it acceptable, but that is a matter for another sermon.

I am not saying that the writers of Chronicles were purposefully distorting the past. They were remembering for a different purpose, in a different time, under different pressures about what needed to be said. Moreover, Kings and Chronicles disagree about their own history, inside the same Bible. The tension we feel today between honouring a place's beauty and reckoning honestly with who paid for it is not new. Scripture already knows this argument: it has been having it with itself for centuries. And it never settles the disagreement by silencing one voice; it keeps both, side by side, both canonised.

When I said at the beginning that I still enter this Cathedral in awe, I meant it. Its beauty is real. Its holiness, I believe, is real too. As are the prayers and acts of worship offered here for generations.

Also real is the history woven into its stones. Scripture does not ask us to choose between these realities, as though one cancels the other. It asks something more difficult: to tell the truth about them both. That is what the writers of Kings do. They allow us to marvel at the Temple, and then, in the middle of all the cedar and gold, they let God interrupt our admiration. 'Concerning this house', God says, 'I will dwell among you if you keep the covenant.'

For me, this is the most remarkable moment in the whole account. Because, for all its splendour, the Temple is not permitted to explain itself. Its beauty is not allowed to become its own justification. God remains free to interrupt, to speak, to question, and — yes — to judge. That is

the gift of this passage. It does not teach us to love beauty less. Rather, it teaches us never to separate beauty from truth, nor worship from justice. The Bible itself refuses to do that. It preserves voices that disagree. It remembers with gratitude, and with grief. It honours, and it questions. It refuses both sentimentality and cynicism.

Perhaps that is how the Church is called to remember as well. Not by pretending our inheritance is simpler or purer than it is, but by trusting that truthfulness does not diminish what is holy. Indeed, truthfulness is one of the ways God keeps making a people holy: inviting us to become a people whose worship, whose memory, and whose common life bear faithful witness to the God of truth who dwells among us.

Amen.