



A THOUGHT FOR THE WEEKEND

15th September, 2023

Continuing the theme of 'background' characters in the Bible, this weekend we have *two*.....

"...Bezalel, Oholiab and every skilled person to whom the LORD has given skill and ability to know how to carry out all the work of constructing the sanctuary are to do the work just as the LORD has commanded."

Exodus 36:1

I like Bezalel and Oholiab, perhaps partly because their names roll mellifluously off the tongue, making them memorable! But it's much more than that. They were *"...filled ... with the Spirit of God, with wisdom, with understanding, with knowledge and with all kinds of skills..."* (Exodus 35:31), and with *"the ability to teach others"* (v.34). They feature towards the end of Exodus and then effectively vanish; their work is done.

Bezalel was an artistic designer and craftsman in wood, precious metals and gemstones (Exodus 31:2-5). Oholiab, his helper (Exodus 31:6), was perhaps more of a fabrics man (31:8-10), maybe even a perfumier (31:11). Details of their work are given in Chapters 35 and 36. (If you're into such things, think Grinling Gibbons and William Morris!)

Together they were responsible for the designing and making of artefacts, fabrics, vestments, etc. for the earliest tabernacle (Exodus 25:8-9; 26:1), and for the teaching and leading of a team continuing that work. They made sacred articles that survived for generations (2 Chronicles 1:5).

Of what significance are they to us?

Firstly, their calling and skill are entirely from God; they are *"filled with the Spirit of God"*. They are not *primarily* artisans, but people inspired with *"wisdom, understanding and knowledge"*. Our present age seems to be rediscovering -and revaluing- the artisan, the small scale, and the sense that there is wisdom and gentleness in the cultivating of such easy-to-lose skills and the wellbeing that goes with them. (Cf. 'The Repair Shop'!)

Secondly, and of equal importance, is the reminder to us in our secular pragmatic age, that sacred things are important. With the rise of non-conformity and the growth of plain Bible-based traditions such as ours, some 'babies were thrown out with the bath-water'! For fear of 'idol-worship' and ostentatious finery, chapels had plain furnishings, no stained glass, no statues, minimal vestments, not even musical instruments in some traditions; -and only a plain cross at the front. Today we are rediscovering something of the value of inspired arts and crafts, music and dance, banners and screens, symbols and icons, to lead us into worship and a sense of the sacred.

As with the work of Bezalel and Oholiab, only the best was good enough for God, but the risk for us -as for them- is that the sacred skills and artefacts may themselves become distractions, objects of worship or mere human displays. The divine call of these men is mentioned in Exodus 31 and elaborated in 35:30 to 37:1, but notice that they are completely absent from the making of the golden calf as an idol, and its aftermath (chapters 32-34). Bezalel and Oholiab are nowhere to be seen.

Not all are leaders like Moses, or speakers like Aaron... but for designers, craftspeople, painters, needleworkers, musicians, etc. (whatever your gift), the words of James Montgomery's hymn apply: *"Craftsman's art and music's measure, for Thy pleasure all combine"*.