

# RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 4: Ezra 3:1-7



# INTRODUCTION

This is our fourth Sunday looking at the book of Ezra and I am sure you were pleased to see that after last weeks long list of names we had a much more typical passage from the Bible this week! The passage you have just read speaks about the start of the rebuilding of the temple in Jerusalem, destroyed some seventy years ago. This project was undertaken by some fifty-thousand Jews who had returned from their exile in Babylon. As we have seen over the past few weeks God was in control of the entire situation, faithful to his promises and caring about the fate of his people. The rebuilding of the temple was an opportunity for the Jews to return to worshipping this God whom they had neglected, repair their relation with God, and restore their identity as God's chosen people just as our return to our church buildings after lock-down presents us with similar opportunities. But what does this passage, the start of rebuilding the temple and in particular the altar, have to say to us as we consider the future of our churches? It will show us that we need to be united, working together, and focused on the cross.

## UNITED WE STAND

The rebuilding of the temple was a significant thing for the returned exiles. It represented the place where God dwelt and because of that it was the only place that they could properly worship God and offer sacrifices to him. It is an event of such significance that 'the people gathered as one man to Jerusalem' to see it begin (Ez. 3:1). It was an event that unified the Jewish people; no one was left behind, no one had something more pressing to attend to, and they all travelled to Jerusalem from their homes in the surrounding areas (Ez. 2:70) for this new beginning which was occurring in the first few weeks of the Jewish year. A new year, a new start, a new temple.

There could have been a variety of reasons why the all the Jews returned to Jerusalem to worship. It could have been to give thanks for their safe return acknowledging God's protection during their long and dangerous journey from Babylon; it could have been because they were afraid and wanted God's help (Ez. 3:3); or for some of them, who could remember the worship before the exile, it simply could have been nostalgia and wanting to return to the worship they used to have. Whatever their motivation, there was one thing that unified them all. The Jews returned because they acknowledged that God was worthy of worship and for them, this could only happen at the temple in Jerusalem.

Such a united approach by the Jewish people should be an example for us

today as we work out what worship looks like during lock-down and contemplate what it might be like when we return to our church buildings. There may be an expectation that things just 'return to normal' but as we have been hearing for the last few weeks, what we have now is the new normal and something like it will be shaping society for months to come. To think that Sunday mornings will return to what they were before lock-down anytime soon is at best naive and at worst ignorant of the situation we are in. Our Sunday worship is different now and will be different again, in fact, it may have multiple different incarnations between now and next year as lock-down continues to ease. But the God we worship is the same and so, just as the Jews acknowledged that God was worthy of worship at the time of Ezra, we need to hold onto that same truth as we experience all the changes to our worship that are on the horizon and that we are experiencing now.

This period of isolation has the potential to divide our church communities, for us each to worship in our own way, to forget about those we worship alongside, and for us all to have different ideas about what the future might hold for us as a Church. But instead of such division, I implore you to be united. Now, don't get me wrong, I am not saying that we all need to be the same, the Bible famously tells us that we all have different gifts and roles to play in the service of God (see 1 Cor. 12), and so we will all have different perspectives. What I am saying though is this: in this uncertain time, let the worship of God be what unites us - however it may look. We read in Ezra 3:4 that the Jews came together to celebrate the Festival of Booths using their shared history of God's provision for them as they travelled to the promised land. Let us do likewise, for we share the same history of redemption and salvation through the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ let that be what unites us in our worship and let us talk with one another about what the future might look like so we can approach it together. We need to be united.

## FOLLOWING THE LEADER?

The Jews were united in their need for the rebuilding of the temple which would mean a huge amount of work and a good plan. However the rebuilding of the temple was unlike any building project I have ever seen or read about. Usually with these projects you start by laying the foundations, then you build the structural parts of the house, the exterior, any supporting walls etc. and the last thing that you do is everything inside. Well, the Jews didn't do that, they started with the altar, at the instruction of two people: Jeshua, a priest, and Zerubbabel, a leader of the Jewish people.

These two people decided on the priority of rebuilding the altar over every

other aspect of the temple in fact it was of such importance to them that it was decided upon before materials were even ordered for the restoration of the rest of the temple (Ez. 3:7). I will talk about why they made such a decision to prioritise the altar in a moment, but first I want to just take a moment to pause and reflect on what these two people, Jeshua and Zerubbabel represent and how it is relevant to us today.

In Jeshua and Zerubbabel we have the sacred and the secular coming together, the priest and the political leader. Yes, they shared the same faith but they had different roles. Jeshua would have led the people in worship and offered sacrifices and prayers on behalf of the people; Zerubbabel would have dealt with things of a more political and practical nature. They were both leaders in their respective fields who came together to make this decision.

Often, as a Church, we fall into the trap of thinking that everything needs to be led by the vicar, or the ministry team, or the worship band. But that is not the case. Yes, the vicar has a role, a calling, a vocation, which has leading a church as a pretty large feature within it but it is not a role to be done in isolation. If we isolate leadership of our churches to just the clergy then you end up with what has happened to so many ministers over the years of them being overworked, over-stressed, and ultimately burnt out. But removing all leadership from the minister has just as serious a set of consequences. Time for God and his church is hard to find when you have a family, a job, and all sorts of other commitments vying for your attention. In a vicar you have someone whose time is devoted to God and his people so to restrict them to leading the service on a Sunday morning is to waste that wisdom, insight, and prayer that the vicar has done. A church cannot be led by the vicar alone, nor can it be done without them and the same goes for the people of the church too! In the people of Jeshua and Zerubbabel we have an example of the ordained and the laity working together to lead God's people and take them forward, let us do likewise. Some of us will have gifts and talents that we use in our jobs or our hobbies that can be used in the service of God; one of those gifts may be leadership or collaborative working or vision. Offer your gift in service to the church, speak to your vicar or church warden, join the PCC which is where vision is curated and decisions made. Each of us has something to offer the church and when that gift is used together with the minister then it has the power to change the entire church.

## THE HEART OF THE MATTER

With the joint decision of the setting of the altar decided upon by Jeshua and Zerubbabel we now get to the question of why this was prioritised over

everything else in the temple. Surely some walls, a door, and a roof would have been a better place to start? Well, it may surprise you to hear that this is not the first time an altar has been prioritised over everything else. If we look back to the book of Genesis and the story of Abraham we see that when Abraham first set foot in the land that God had promised him he set up an altar to the LORD (Gen. 12:7). So why are altars so significant?

Well, throughout the Hebrew bible we have numerous altars set up to God, all in slightly different circumstances and in different places. However, they do all have three things in common. Firstly, they were a place of worship where God was glorified for who he is and what he had done. Secondly they were a place of communion between God and the worshipper (e.g. Ex. 29:43). And finally, they were a place of testimony to the one true God and therefore a reminder against idolatry. In the circumstances facing the Jews of being in a hostile area with nothing but a ruined city for shelter and protection and the teachings of an alien culture still lingering in the minds of some of their citizens can you blame them for prioritising the altar over everything else?! If the altar represents a place to glorify God for what he has done, then it would bring hope to the Jews for a better future. If the altar represents a place where God is present with his people then that would give them courage in the face of their enemies (Ez. 3:3). If the altar was a place of testimony to the one true God then it would serve as a reminder of what the returned exiles had come back for - to turn away from other gods and the lifestyles of alien cultures and return to the one true God who had chosen them as his people. The altar met religious, social and even some political needs for the Jews and this is before we even get to the role of sacrifices as a means of the Jews making themselves right with God. Now it makes sense for the altar to be prioritised, but what on earth does that mean for us today? What is God trying to tell us through this passage?

Simply put, it is telling us to return to the foot of the cross and make that our priority for the cross is our altar. At the cross God was glorified for his grace and his love for us poured out as his Son took on the punishment that we deserved. At the cross, communion with God was made possible as sin was defeated and the barrier between ourselves and God was removed. At the cross we have the greatest testimony for our creator, one who 'so loved the world, that he gave his only Son', and through the resurrection the confidence that 'whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life' (Jn 3:16). When we make the cross a priority, when we reflect on what happened and what it means to us to can offer us the same things that it did for the Jews: hope, courage, and a reminder that we have different priorities to the rest of the world.

The cross is a fountain of truth that can speak into our lives and so it needs to be prioritised. This is what unites us and this is what helps us to work together because when we remember the death of Jesus Christ on the cross during communion, (be that spiritual or otherwise), we not only have communion with God but with each and every person who is sharing that moment with us. If I could have it my way, we would celebrate communion before every PCC meeting so that those who represent the leadership of these churches were not only focused on who we do the business of church for and why we do it, but also to unite each person there with one another; that it might lay a foundation for a united vision and purpose, for a civil discussion, and an evening that glorifies God.

As we work out where we are going as a church, both in vacancy, and in lockdown, let us take a leaf out of the book of Ezra, let us be united, work together, and be focused on the cross.