

# RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 1: Ezra 1:1-4



# INTRODUCTION

There has been a lot of talk about how this worldwide pandemic is like nothing else we have seen in our lifetimes. Some of us have experienced war, some irregular power supply, others restrictions on what food is available to us. For myself, the only time I remember being so isolated was when I was laid up in bed for months on end after an unfortunate lawnmower accident – but that is a story for another day! The restrictions we face because of lockdown are new to everyone and no one has been excluded from the effects of it although it has affected some more than others – as some have commented, we are all in the same storm, but we are not all in the same boat. For us as a church community this storm has disrupted all of our communal activities, we can still pray and worship privately but we cannot join our praises together in the way that we have been accustomed to, to ‘praise God in his sanctuary’ (Ps. 150.1).

But for those of us who are familiar with the story of God’s people in the Old Testament you will know that these restrictions on how we worship are nothing new. At the end of the book of 2 Kings Nebuchadnezzar king of Babylon came with all his army against Jerusalem and laid siege to it, destroyed Jerusalem, and took the Israelites into exile. The people of Israel spent a long time in exile in Babylon away from the temple, away from their regular place of worship, even being forced to worship other gods in some cases (see Daniel 3.1-7) and so there is something in the very history of who we are as God’s people that should be able to guide and encourage us through this time and help us to see a future hope for what our gathered worship may look like.

We have been in lockdown now for over a month and have adapted, in one way or another, to new ways of practising our faith, be that through a renewed focus on private prayer, listening to worship music or hymns at home, joining in with a live streamed service online, or reading the reflections that we have been producing here in the benefice. Although there is still more that we could be doing to continue to worship God and be “church” during this lockdown we are finding ways to continue to practise and grow in our faith. What we may not have done too much is to look at what comes next, what will church look like after COVID-19? Or perhaps I should say, what should the church look like after COVID-19? With the

restrictions in place unlikely to be lifted for everyone at the same time, it is quite possible that the church will be open for public worship but not everyone be able to attend. This means that for a time how we worship will once again change. But this is not a bad thing, rather we will have a fantastic opportunity to re-shape what our gathered worship looks like and provide a better way for people to grow in their faith.

It is this future that we need to start thinking about now and to guide us as to what this future should like we are going to look at how God led his people out of exile from Babylon and returned them to Jerusalem and what principles we can take from how they returned once more to worshipping God in their own place. We are going to do this by working our way through the book of Ezra, a minor prophet in the Old Testament, which speaks of Israel's return from exile, the rebuilding of the temple, and the new way of life that was established. At the end of the story of Ezra the people of Israel are more distinctly God's people than they had been for centuries and so it is my hope that by studying this book, as we discover what our worship might look like after lockdown, we too might become more distinctly God's people, that we might look more like our saviour Jesus Christ who saved us from eternal death and brought us the gift of eternal life through his death and resurrection, which, as 1 John 2.6 says, is what we as Christians are all aiming for.

## **G O D   &   C O N T R O L**

The book of Ezra begins with the people of Israel in exile in Babylon. They have been there for nearly seventy years and so there would have been at least two, if not three generations of Jews who knew nothing but life in exile – hopefully, lockdown will not last as long! But after these years of exile, in the first year of the reign of King Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus makes a proclamation. It would have been similar to what we are all familiar with today when there is a new beginning, be it in the form of the Queen's speech at the opening of parliament, or a new football manager bringing in sweeping changes to the style of football his team plays – a statement is made that sets the tone for what is to come. But unlike the Queen or a football manager who choose the direction of change, for Cyrus we read that it is God who influences his proclamation. We read in Ezra 1.1 that 'the Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia' so that the prophecy of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, and that God's people would be returned from exile (Jer. 29.10) and the city of

Jerusalem and its temple restored.

The practice of restoring sacred cities such as Jerusalem was common practice under the Babylonians as they believed that in restoring other gods those gods in turn would worship the gods of Babylon. But this fact does not take away anything from the role God had in these matters for the prophecy of Isaiah speaks of God's influence over Cyrus in the years leading up to this event (Is. 44.28-45.13). It is this God, who worked through Cyrus to fulfil his purposes for Israel, that is still the God we worship today. God is ultimately in control of the fate of his people, this was true for the Jews in exile and it is true for his Church today as it lives through lock-down. We must take confidence in this fact, that although we might not be able to see the big picture, God can, and he is a God who will never abandon his people.

## GOD & POLITICS

God is in control, and part of that control is seen in his appointment of earthly leaders to govern the people here on earth. In these trying times, where our leaders in government and their advisors are under immense pressure to make the right decisions, when every move they make is scrutinised and critiqued, we must trust that God is still working through them as part of his plan to bring all people into his kingdom of love and grace and to give them the gift of eternal life. Jesus Christ himself reminds us that the role of the government must be respected (Mt. 22.21; Mk. 12.17; Lk. 20.25) as well as the apostle Paul speaking about the same issue in his letter to the church in Rome (Rom. 13.1-7). Whatever we might think of the government (or the Queen for that matter) we must trust that God has put them in power for a reason. If we trust in God's true sovereignty over all the rulers of the world then it follows that we should also pray for those rulers. At this time, when being in a position of power is more difficult than ever, it might be closer to our minds to pray for our leaders, but we should pray for our leaders at all times as the author of 1 Timothy says:

First of all, then, I urge that supplications, prayers, intercessions, and thanksgivings be made for all people, 2 for kings and all who are in high positions, that we may lead a peaceful and quiet life, godly and dignified in every way.

If you are wondering how to pray for our leaders, then look no further than the Book of Common Prayer. In it we have the prayerful petition that under

the Queen 'we may be godly and quietly governed,' that is, that our leaders would seek to rule in a way that values those under them as God values them. When we think that God loves all but has a heart for the needy, the oppressed and the downtrodden, then this most certainly is something we need to be praying for our politicians every day! Pray for our leaders – they need all the prayer they can get.

## **G O D   &   H I S   P E O P L E**

Not only does the proclamation of King Cyrus remind us to pray for our leaders it also heralds a new beginning for the people of God. The thing about new beginnings is that whenever they happen there is an opportunity for change. With this chance to leave Babylon and return to Jerusalem the Jews had an opportunity to change, to discard the influences of Babylon on their religious practices (the beginning of the book of Daniel gives a good example of the pressures the Jews were under to conform) and worship once more the God of Israel. The rest of the book of Ezra reveals exactly how that happened and what the Jews did, but for the moment let us hold on to the idea that change is a chance for a new beginning. As and when the lockdown we are in ends and we can gather again as a community of faith that too will be a new beginning, a post COVID-19 beginning, and we too will have an opportunity for change. But unlike Cyrus, who did not know God yet was influenced by him, we have the advantage of a living relationship with God thanks to the work of Jesus Christ on the cross. Instead of blindly going on with our lives hoping that we are going the way God wants us to we must actively listen to where God is leading us. What change does he want us to make? Who does he want us to be? How can we best share the good news of God's love for all creation in our communities? As we approach a new beginning and a time of change it is more important than ever for us to be praying in preparation for that time. We must be praying for our church leaders, for our bishops, our clergy, our church wardens, our PCCs and the ministry team, all those who in one way or another will be seeking God's guidance for the direction of change that will take place at the end of lockdown. However, this alone is not enough. The Old Testament is full of leaders who failed to follow God, who ignored his ways and did not listen to him. As members of God's Church, we all have a responsibility to make sure that the leaders of God's church are listening to him and acting on what they hear. So, as well as praying for the leaders in our churches, we should also be

praying for ourselves. We should be praying for trust and grace to let our leaders take us on this journey of change, but alongside this we should also be praying for confidence to rebuke and challenge our leaders and for boldness to bring new ideas to them ourselves.

We are living through an event that is unprecedented in our lifetimes, but as a Church, we are not living through something new but something that God's people have encountered before. The book of Ezra has much to say in guiding us through this time. It reminds us that God is in control but we have a responsibility to pray for our government and to pray for our Church – particularly at this time.