

RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 6: Ezra 4:1-5, 24

INTRODUCTION

Today is Father's Day, a day when we celebrate all fathers as well as all who have been like a Father to us - all those male role models we have had in our lives who have guided and supported us through life. Being a father-figure to someone is a bit of a roller-coaster ride, there are some low points (for me this would be the guilt of being responsible for Josiah when he broke his arm!), but the highs are never too far away and when they come you cannot help but smile. We can all relate to the highs and lows of fatherhood in one way or another as life itself is full of highs and lows and the story of the people of Israel is no exception to this.

In our series on the book of Ezra we started at the low of the Jews being a people exiled to a foreign country unable to worship and in danger of forgetting their identity as the people of God. But then it moves quickly onto a high point as God intervenes and provides a means for them to return to Jerusalem through an edict of Cyrus, king of Persia. God shows his faithfulness to his people and provides them with a means to return to worship him in Jerusalem, an opportunity to repair their relationship with him, and the chance to restore their identity as his people. Return, repair, and restore - that is the goal for the Jews in the book of Ezra. Between the start of the return to Jerusalem and where we got to last time with the rebuilding of the temple there were some more highs and lows but we finished last time on a high. The temple, although not complete and nowhere near the splendour of the first temple, was now fit for worship and so a celebration occurred echoing the grand celebrations that happened when Solomon's temple first opened.

But, as we all know, often when we are at our happiest it does not take long for it to be forgotten and replaced with any number of other emotions. I think back to any number of stories I have heard from when someone first becomes a Christian. They are full of passion and fire for God, telling their friends about how their life has been changed by the good news of Jesus Christ. But that passion often fades either by it becoming a normal part of everyday life or because we face opposition to our new found faith. After the high of the re-dedication of the temple, the story of the Jews in Jerusalem was about to hit a low and this is what we will be looking at this week. We will see how all the hard work they had put into their return, repair, and restoration was under threat by foul motives and fear and how our faith faces similar threats today. But we will also see that we are provided with a counter to these threats through clarity of mind and community.

FACING OPPOSITION

The Jews in Jerusalem had lived peacefully in the land since their return from exile. Up to this point although they had perceived a threat from the inhabitants of the land (Ezra 3:3) they had not experienced any direct opposition to the work that they were doing. However, that was all about to change, in fact, from this point forward the Jews would be unable to do any work on the temple without facing some form of opposition.

At this point it is probably worth explaining why we are not looking at verses 6-23 this week. They cover the opposition that the Jews faced during the reigns of Ahasuerus (or Xerxes in the Greek translation) and under Artaxerxes I, two kings who reigned over Persia after Cyrus and Darius. To look at these verses would take us away from the narrative we have been following and launch us decades into the future. These verses are here to emphasise the scale of the opposition that the Jews faced but we can pick up the key themes surrounding their opposition from the verses we are looking at today.

Returning to Ezra 4:1 we hear about 'adversaries of Judah and Benjamin' approaching Zerubbabel and the other Jewish leaders with an offer of help. They are volunteering to help rebuild the temple as they too worship God. On first hearing this you might think "This is great news! The temple will be finished so much quicker with that help!" It doesn't sound like something that your 'adversaries' would do and so the emphatic response of Zerubbabel in rejecting their help seems harsh and unkind! But, as we are all aware, sometimes conflict is not as obvious as we might think, sometimes it is bubbling under the surface like a grudge being held just waiting for the right time to make your move. This scenario reminds me of being a teenager at school, whenever people who had previously shown nothing but disdain for me suddenly started being nice I knew that something was up and more often than not they were attempting to humiliate me in a way that would be much more harmful than a scuffle in the playground ever would! The same thing is happening here - the adversaries of Judah and Benjamin are being subtle in their opposition, they have foul motives waiting to ruin the work of the Jews.

How can we know that? We read nothing about malicious intent in the passage, in fact all we hear is that they have been sacrificing to God just as the Jews did. To understand this and why Zerubbabel reacted so negatively towards their offer of help we need to find out a bit more about who these adversaries are and we get a clue to this at the end of verse 2 - they are people who were brought to the land in the days of Esarhaddon king of

Assyria. With this detail we can establish that the adversaries are most likely foreigners who were forced to settle in the northern kingdom of Israel after the fall of Samaria and it is this that would have set alarm bells ringing for Zerubbabel. If we look at the book of 2 Kings 17 which describes the importing of people into the northern territory of Israel we see that although they had attempted to practice the religion of the Jews they 'also served their own gods' (2 Kgs 17:24-33).

With these details we can now see the subtlety of their opposition. They are seeking to rebuild the temple not just for the glory of God, but so that they could worship their other gods there as well. No wonder Zerubbabel, Jeshua, and the rest of the leaders of Israel responded so negatively saying that these foreigners will have nothing to do with the rebuilding of the temple (Ezr. 4:3). These are not people who take God seriously but rather are people who see God as one among many gods and by helping with the rebuilding of the temple they are hoping to have a say in its functions. These are people who will hinder the Jews return to worship the one true God, the repair of their relationship, and the restoration of their identity as God's people - no wonder they are called adversaries.

When situations like this arrive in the church, when someone offers to help with a financial gift or the offer of practical help are we as discerning as Zerubbabel was? We rarely hesitate when an offer of help comes our way and even if we do stop to discern the motives of the offer we too readily dismiss them and see it as an opportunity for evangelism or for "the greater good" of the church rather than something that could tarnish the reputation of the church. In this current climate of Black Lives Matter the history of the Church of England has revealed the extent to which it is built upon the money of slavers and how some of its clergy even employed slaves within their households. You can argue they did nothing illegal and that many others around at the time were doing much worse but that does not make it right and we can see the effect it is having now. As these associations are coming to light they are damaging the reputation of the church and the faith of its members. We must remember that we are held to a higher standard than the rest of the world, we are held to God's standards, seeking to do his will and share his love with the world. The prophet Isaiah puts it clearly, we should: 'cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; bring justice to the fatherless, plead the widow's cause' (Is. 1:16-17). The actions of Zerubbabel remind us that we need to think about the consequences of our actions and have clarity of mind before we make decisions. We need to ask "Have we given this enough thought? In accepting a gift on behalf of the church are we risking its reputation? Are we risking damage to other Christians who might see a gift

donated by activities that are contrary to biblical teaching and think therefore that those actions are alright by God?" Our faith and the faith of others can be damaged by those with foul motives and this can only be countered by clear thinking and clarity of mind.

Not only does this passage remind us to have clear thinking and discernment when receiving gifts, but it is also a timely reminder for us to check our own motivations for all that we do. Are we doing them for our own selfish gain or are we doing them for God's glory? What is our motivation for all we do? I am reminded once more of what we have discussed on a number of occasions throughout this series on Ezra, we need to return to the foundation of our faith and look to Jesus Christ for our motivation - in fact this idea has gained so much traction that it turned into a famous acronym that was plastered on posters around churches, on wristbands, and scribbled in Bibles - WWJD or "What would Jesus do?" As we reflect on our lives this should be forever in our minds - what would Jesus do? When we follow this with wisdom and discernment we will be more likely to act with the same clarity of mind that Zerubbabel did and not let foul motives, from others or ourselves, damage our faith.

THE FEAR FACTOR

Unfortunately for the Jews, in spite of the defence of Zerubbabel and the other Jewish leaders against their adversaries, the opposition they faced was still too much for them. We read in Ezra 4:4-5 that the Jews were discouraged and too afraid to continue the work on the temple. Now we all know that building projects often are delayed for one reason or another often putting them months behind schedule, here however, the work stopped until the second year of the reign of Darius king of Persia - a period not of a couple of months but rather of sixteen years!

This should not have happened. Remember, immediately before these events we had the celebrations at the re-dedication of the temple, a building that symbolised God's presence among his people as well as providing a constant reminder of his faithfulness. The Jews should have been encouraged by what they had done and what the temple represented but, when faced with opposition, they forgot this and became afraid and discouraged.

How were they discouraged after all that God had faithfully done for them, after all they had achieved? It is likely that the Jews were discouraged by persistent attempts to undermine their work just like we saw in verses 1-3 never giving them any respite. We already knew from verses 6-23 that the

Jews faced ongoing opposition through the reigns of Ahasuerus and Artaxerxes and in verse 5 we also see these things happened 'all the days of King Cyrus of Persia, even until the reign of Darius king of Persia.' Coupled with this there was likely to be intimidation and threats from their adversaries for although this was not a military situation, the verb used for 'make them afraid' in this verse is most commonly used in to describe the fear you experience in battle situations. The use of this particular verb implies that the Jews thought there would be physical conflict and so it is likely that this fear came from threats of such violence. The fear could have also been because, as we read later in verse four, the people of the land had the ear of those in power as they 'bribed counsellors' against the Jews. The adversaries intimidated the Jews by showing they had power in high places. In the face of such persistent abuse and threats, when it would have felt like the world was against them, it is not hard to imagine that their faith would start to disappear, that they would forget the faithfulness of God, and fear and discouragement would creep in to replace it.

But facing opposition is nothing new for God's people. Throughout Ezra we have seen connections to events of their past - primarily the Exodus and the building of the temple. Both these events are surrounded by opposition from the Egyptians to the Canaanites and in these instances the Jews overcome their opposition. The opposition the Jews faced in Ezra 4 is not new but they are unable to overcome it for sixteen years - why was this so different? I believe I have an answer - circumstances. In the Exodus the Israelites had nothing to lose, the same again in the conquering of the promised land but here even though the temple is only a shadow of its former glory, there is so much to lose. At the end of Ezra 3 the Jews were on a high, the altar was set, the temple could receive worshippers once more and a great celebration was going on and suddenly all of that is put in jeopardy, they could lose it all. All the hard work the Jews had put in to returning to God and worshipping him in a way that would repair their relationship with him and restore their identity as his people was under threat. If the threats led to the destruction of the temple and a return to exile all their work would be undone, they would be back to where they started. No wonder they were afraid as if they were in battle, for the Jews would have thought this opposition that was rising against them was a matter of life and death.

But this fear and discouragement in the face of opposition is no excuse for stopping the work on the temple. As we have heard throughout this series, the Jews had been given plenty of reasons to trust that God is faithful to his people. It is the same for us today; we will be discouraged, we will be afraid, and we will face opposition, Jesus himself told us as much (Mt 10:16-25), and

every time we experience this it has the potential to damage our faith as we forget the goodness of God, his grace, and his faithfulness. This is why it is so important to be members of a church. A church is not just a building - the last few months have shown us that! - it is a group of people, a community. Part of the purpose of the church is to remind one another of the faithfulness of God, for all he has done for us. We do that through worship and preaching and prayer - the more formal parts of church on a Sunday morning - but also through our interactions with one another. 1 Thes. 5:11 reminds us to 'encourage one another and build one another up' so we do not lose our faith. We can do that through having intentional conversations with one another, asking how we are doing not just generally with work or home, but with our faith, our prayer life. We can give thanks for each others spiritual gifts, we can remind one another of God's actions in the past and look forward to being a part of them in the future.

I know that encouraging and supporting one another is difficult right now, especially with social distancing and being unable to meet as we used to on a Sunday morning but hopefully some of you will be joining us at 11am this Sunday 21st June for our Zoom Coffee Morning where we can chat with one another and encourage and support each other because we need to be doing more of this. We need to be doing more of this so that when the bad times come we have a network of people, a church, who can support us and guide us through it.

This passage has shown us that our faith faces threats in the form of foul motives, both from ourselves and others, and fear which can make us forget God's faithfulness. But we can guard against these through clarity of mind, asking ourselves - what would Jesus do? - and by being part of the community that is the church. seeking support and encouragement so that if we are afraid we do not lose our faith and forget the goodness and love of God.

Amen.