

RETURNING TO WORSHIP

A JOURNEY THROUGH THE BOOK OF EZRA

Week 9: Ezra 5:11-17

INTRODUCTION

I wonder if you have ever thought about how the closure of our church buildings looks to those who are not part of our church? What does it say to them? Does it tell them that the Church is of no use at this time? Or is it worse than that, does the closure tell them that God has no power or that he doesn't even exist?! We know that this is not true, we know that although the buildings are closed the Church itself is still very much open, but it is amazing what meaning people can take from a closed building and apply to God or the Christian faith. In fact, this situation is not really that new, people have always been judging the Church based on what is seen on the outside - whether it was the grandeur of a cathedral drawing people to God, or an old church building being converted into a nightclub saying that God is being replaced. It even extends beyond the buildings to the Church as a body of people - Christianity is the religion of the elderly, God isn't relevant to young people because we never see any young Christians, Christianity is only for the middle-classes or as it is often thought about regarding the Church of England - only for white people. Perception has, is, and will always be an issue for the Church, but as the old saying goes - "You should never judge a book by its cover" because the Church is not primarily about its people but about its God and you shouldn't judge God based on his people!

We are sinful, broken, imperfect people whereas God is our holy, mighty, powerful, creator, redeemer and saviour - the two cannot be compared. Yet, we are God's people, his representatives on earth who have been given the mandate to share the good news of Jesus Christ to the whole world and so what we say and do will always be reflected back on God. God is what defines our faith, not the buildings or the people and so who God is is what we as Christians need to be communicating in all we do.

More on that in a bit, for the moment let us return to chapter 5 of the book of Ezra. Last time we came across a few new characters 'Tattenai the governor of the province Beyond the River and Shethar-bozenai and their associates' (Ezr. 5:3) who for sake of brevity we called "the governors." These governors were concerned about the re-building of the temple and whether it might signify a threat to the Persian empire and so they asked the Jewish leaders "Who gave you a decree to build this house and to finish this structure?" What we have in Ezra 5:11-17 is the response the Jews give to this question and although it seems on the surface to be quite a dry and factual response, when we dig a little deeper we see that the entire response is one that glorifies God.

OUR IDENTITY

The Jewish leaders responded to the question in a manner that is typical of the time: they declared who they were and then answered the question at hand. There is nothing particularly unusual about their response until we take a closer look at the details within the declaration of their identity. If we were introducing ourselves to someone we might give reference to our profession or where we live, for example, "I'm the vicar from Coxley." We might make reference to a common acquaintance saying something like "I'm Guy, friends with your neighbour Simon." A couple of generations ago we might have referred to ourselves by referencing our parents or grandparents, a style of introduction we see in the Bible (c.f. Gn. 24:24; Jo. 17:4; 1 Sm 17:58; Est. 8:5). On the international stage we refer to ourselves by our homeland or our leaders. There are many ways to introduce yourself but the Jews choose not to follow any of these conventions.

Instead of saying, "we are the Jewish people who have returned to our land after exile in Babylon," a perfectly accurate description by all accounts, they declare their identity not in terms of where they live, or who their ancestors and kings were but rather by their relation to God himself, that they are 'the servants of the God of heaven and earth' (Ezr. 5:11). The Jews define their identity not by the things of this world but by their relationship with God.

In the world today there are so many things that we could use to define our identity. We might define ourselves based on our bodies such as our race or our gender; we might define ourselves based on our lifestyles such as our wealth, our achievements, or our sexuality; or we might define ourselves based on our flaws such as our addictions or our anger. Perhaps we define ourselves based on our experiences - the fact that we beat cancer, or have diabetes, or that we are divorced. The list is pretty much endless, but in each case our sense of identity comes detached from God, the one who actually defines us.

God defines us because he is the one who created us. This has fundamental implications for our identity. For example, as the creator of life, he is also the one who sustains us day by day. This means that we are dependent on God for our daily existence, something we affirm each time we say the Lord's prayer ("Give us this day our daily bread"). God is also the ruler of creation 'the God of heaven and earth' as the book of Ezra defines it. In declaring their identity as 'servants of the God of heaven and earth' the Jews were saying that God was their primary authority. This means we, as God's people on earth, are his servants who have God as their primary authority. Our identity as human beings is tied up in our connection to God. As we explore who God is we find out more about ourselves. The book of Ephesians tells us that God is our Father as we are adopted into his family by Christ, this means we are his

children and as his children we need his parenting everyday, we need his guidance, his patient instruction, his loving care. The gospel story tells us that God is merciful and loving, with the death and resurrection of his Son Jesus Christ removing the power of death and sin from us and giving us the gift of eternal life. This reminds us of our imperfect state, that no matter how well we might think we have life sorted we are still in need of God's love and forgiveness. I could go on but I hope you can see the pattern that is emerging. Our identity as human beings expresses our need for God and once we know our identity in God then we are best placed to live the life that he has called us to. We become generous and merciful to others because we continually receive these things from God. We learn how to best protect others, because we know we find refuge firstly in God. We develop into leaders because we have served under the leadership of God. We become more caring because we have experienced the shepherding of God. We need to be those who see their identity in God because that is the only way that we will become the people that God is calling us to be.

OUR STORY

The response of the Jews not only reminds us that it is God who shapes our identity but it also reminds us of our story. In verse 11-16 we get a picture of the story of God and his people, one characterised by rebellion, judgement, repentance and grace. In Ezra 5:11 we see God's grace in providing for his people the means to build the temple and the provision of 'a great king of Israel;' in 5:12 the Jews recall the destruction of the temple which in the context of God's picture showed that a time of rebellion and judgement had occurred and that a time of repentance and grace was approaching. The time of repentance occurred during the Jews time exiled in Babylon, and the act of grace is what we saw at the very beginning of Ezra when God stirred the spirit of King Cyrus (Ezr. 1:1) and we see here in verses 13-16 with God stirring up of the spirit of Cyrus and him subsequently decreeing that the Jews could return to Jerusalem to rebuild the house of God, the temple. Not only this but the decree allows for the temple's former glory to be restored with the return of its sacred vessels.

Within these six verses we get an example of the bigger picture of God's story of redemption for his people. That bigger story starts with love and grace, with God creating the world and placing mankind as its pinnacle. But the story moves quickly to rebellion through mankind's want to make itself Lord of all rather than following God's rule and so creation is subject to the judgement of God. This judgement meant mankind could not live forever but was subject to death. That is until God himself came became man in the person of Jesus Christ, an act of grace. Jesus lived the perfect life on our behalf, and

when he died and rose again he broke the power that death had on us. This is the Christian story and it is a story that we can all be a part of. When we repent of our desire to live life according to our own rules and submit instead to our creator, the one who knows the best way for us to live, then we become Christians and can claim the victory over death that Christ has won.

Ezra 5:11-16 reminds us, as Christians, of our place in God's story. It reminds us of our sinfulness but at the same time reminds us of the grace of God. It shows us that God has always been this way and will forever be that way - a God who is our ruler, our judge, but also our saviour. God is the same, yesterday, today, and forever.

KNOW WHO YOU ARE, KNOW YOUR STORY

At the beginning of today's message I spoke about how the appearance of our church buildings and our congregations communicate something about our faith to the rest of the world but how it was God who actually defines our faith and that we need to be communicating who God is in all we do. What our exploration of Ezra 5:11-17 has done is give us two ways to communicate to the world who God is: through knowing who we are and knowing our story.

When we know that our identity is found in who God is, as we grow in our knowledge and understanding of who God is we grow in our understanding of who we were made to be. This provides the foundation for our lives to be lived in a way that is how God intended them to be lived and so our lives then glorify God and display his ways for the rest of the world.

When we know our place in God's great story we can see how that story has been worked out in our own lives. We can see the life we led before we knew God and notice how it always pointed us towards our need for God. We can also see the moments of grace and love that we have received from God and how they direct us toward God's great story of grace and love. When we live our lives within this great story, everyday encounters can become moments that edify God and point people to him. And so when we know our story in relation to God we put ourselves in the best place to *share* God's story with others.

We might not be able to change what our faith and our God looks like to others, but in knowing who we are and our place in God's story, we put ourselves in the best position to show and tell others all about our loving, grace-filled, merciful God. Amen.