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The Round Church at St Andrew the Great Cambridge

A Sermon Preached
on Sunday 11th January 2004
by Mark Ashton

Ezekiel 8–11

The Departing Glory

Prelude: Ezekiel 4-7

Last week we started Ezekiel with the first three chapters. Sorry if you missed it. So before we have this week's reading we need to remind ourselves of the book's setting, and I need to explain why we are skipping the next 4 chapters.

It was early in the 6th Century BC, and Ezekiel was in a community of Jews living as exiles in the heart of the Babylonian Empire. We saw last week that when he was called to be a prophet, in 593 BC, it was not clear at first what exactly his prophetic message was going to be. But chapters 4-24 make it absolutely clear that it was to be, first and foremost, a message of judgement: chapter 5, verses 7-13:

“Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: You have been more unruly than the nations around you and have not followed my decrees or kept my laws. You have not even conformed to the standards of the nations around you. ⁸Therefore this is what the Sovereign LORD says: I myself am against you, Jerusalem, and I will inflict punishment on you in the sight of the nations. ⁹Because of all your detestable idols, I will do to you what I have never done before and will never do again. ¹⁰Therefore in your midst fathers will eat their children, and children will eat their fathers. I will inflict punishment on you and will scatter all your survivors to the winds. ¹¹Therefore as surely as I live, declares the Sovereign LORD, because you have defiled my sanctuary with all your vile images and detestable practices, I myself will withdraw my favour; I will not look on you with pity or spare you. ¹²A third of your people will die of the plague or perish by famine inside you; a third will fall by the sword outside your walls; and a third I will scatter to the winds and pursue with drawn sword. ¹³Then my anger will cease and my wrath against them will subside, and I will be avenged. And when I have spent my wrath upon them, they will know that I the LORD have spoken in my zeal.”

Now, as if that were not stark enough in plain language, Ezekiel had to use every other power at his command to make such an unwelcome message more emphatic and more dramatic. Many of the prophets used a wide range of communication techniques, but Ezekiel was in a class of his own: were we to read the whole way through this book, we would find that at times he was mute and unable to speak; he lay on the ground, bound and naked; he acted out strange dumb shows like charades; he dug through the walls of houses; he ‘saw’ things happening a thousand miles away; he heard strange voices and sounds and saw strange images of creatures, of eyes, of creeping things; he suffered emotional paralysis in the face of his wife's death; he seems to have had a fascination with faeces and blood – and he resorted even to pornographic imagery to convey his message. So it's no surprise that some commentators have attempted to psycho-analyse Ezekiel. For example, D. J. Halperin attributed these extraordinary features of Ezekiel's prophecy to ‘an unconscious but overwhelming rage against females, whom he perceived as cruel and powerful, seductive and treacherous; and a more deeply buried rage against males because of some abuse experienced as a child.’ But that sort of speculative explanation helps us not at all.

It all begins here in chapter 4, when Ezekiel acted out a dumb show of the future siege of Jerusalem and lived on starvation rations for 13 months (390 days). His food was meant to be cooked over fuel made from human excrement, but Ezekiel managed to get a concession from God so that it could be cooked on cow dung instead. Then he shaved himself totally with a sword – imagine that if you can! And so it goes on... you will have to read it for yourselves.

But the refrain that keeps coming (and will keep coming) all through these 7 years of hopelessness in Ezekiel's prophecy – covered by chapters 4-24 – is those words with which chapter 7 ends: *“Then they will know that I am the LORD.”* In other words, the catastrophe that had come upon the Jewish nation (and that was going to get worse before it

got better) was not actually a terrible contradiction of all that they believed about their special relationship with God – rather it was the terrible confirmation that God took His threats as seriously as He took His promises. The dreadful punishment they were experiencing actually demonstrated the consistency of God’s character – and therein lay hope, but as yet distant and concealed.

Then, 14 months after his call in Chapters 1-3, Ezekiel had the experience of prophetic clairvoyance, described in chapters 8-11.

1. Religion’s Rotten Core

‘In the sixth year, in the sixth month on the fifth day, while I was sitting in my house and the elders of Judah were sitting before me, the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there’ (Ezekiel 8:1). Just notice the fact that the elders of Judah were sitting before Ezekiel in his house at that moment. It suggests that he did have some standing in the community. It’s not clear what that standing was. Was it an acknowledgement of his religious status as a prophet, at this point (it was less than two years after his ‘call’)? Had they come to hear from God through Ezekiel? Or was it just mere curiosity at the eccentric nature of his behaviour during the preceding 14 months or so (what was he going to do next, this strange man)?

Or perhaps they had even come to try to silence the demoralising message that Ezekiel had begun to give to the exiles. I think we can imagine that. Consider the gross, tactless, insensitivity of telling people who were suffering as deeply as these exiled Israelites were, that they deserved what was happening to them and that it was going to get worse! Any spiritual leader worth his salt knows that in such situations people need affirmation and encouragement and, above all, hope. Think of the psychological damage Ezekiel was inflicting on these exiled Jews by his complete lack of pastoral sensitivity. I don’t think he would get recommended for ordination in any of our denominations today, if he’d been at an ordination conference. I think we can hear exactly the sort of things that would be said about him.

Anyway, right on cue, as they gather to listen to him or to speak to him, Ezekiel has another ecstatic experience: *‘...the hand of the Sovereign LORD came upon me there. ²I looked, and I saw a figure like that of a man. From what appeared to be his waist down he was like fire, and from there up his appearance was as bright as glowing metal. ³He stretched out what looked like a hand and took me by the hair of my head. The Spirit lifted me up between earth and heaven and in visions of God he took me to Jerusalem, to the entrance to the north gate of the inner court, where the idol that provokes to jealousy stood. ⁴And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain’* (8:1c-4).

Six years after he had been exiled from Jerusalem, Ezekiel, in some strange way, is now taken back there again: the place to which the refugees’ thoughts must have turned again and again, as Jews in exile have said to one another so many times down the centuries: “Next year, in Jerusalem.” So what had happened there in the meantime, in this place of the exiles’ dreams and longings?

Well, on the one hand, Ezekiel sees again the vision of the glory of God, just as he had already seen it (twice) in Babylon: *‘And there before me was the glory of the God of Israel, as in the vision I had seen in the plain’* (8:4). But, on the other hand, in a sort of visionary tour of the Temple, he discovers that the centre of Jewish religion is riddled with paganism. The first thing is this idol that provokes to jealousy: *‘Then he said to me, “Son of man, look towards the north.” So I looked, and in the entrance north of the gate of the altar I saw this idol of jealousy. ⁶And he said to me, “Son of man, do you see what they are doing – the utterly detestable things the house of Israel is doing here, things that will drive me far from my sanctuary? But you will see things that are even more detestable”’* (8:5, 6).

And so he does. He is taken into some sort of inner room: *‘So I went in and looked, and I saw portrayed all over the walls all kinds of crawling things and detestable animals and all the idols of the house of Israel* [possibly Egyptian religion is being referred to here]. ¹¹*In front of them stood seventy elders of the house of Israel, and Jaazaniah son of Shaphan was standing among them. Each had a censer in his hand, and a fragrant cloud of incense was rising. ¹²He said to me, “Son of man, have you seen what the elders of the house of Israel are doing in the darkness, each at the shrine of his own idol? They say, ‘The LORD does not see us; the LORD has forsaken the land.’” ¹³Again, he said, “You will see them doing things that are even more detestable”’* (8:10-15). And so he does. Next, he sees women weeping for Tammuz (8:14, 15): a Babylonian cult which Ezekiel might have expected where he was in exile amongst the Babylonians, but surely not in Jerusalem. And finally, in verse 16, there are 25 men worshipping the sun, with their backs to God’s altar.

Now, where is all this happening? In the Jews' own land, in God's own city, in the Temple: at the very, very heart of Jewish religion. When is it happening? It's happening at a time when the Babylonians had conquered Israel, which was a crisis for Israelite faith – how can you go on believing in a God when the gods of Babylon are so obviously more powerful? There were the exiles amongst all the outward manifestations of Babylonian religion: so clearly more powerful than their religion. How can you go on believing in God at that point? Where is it happening? At the very heart. When is it happening? At time of crisis of faith. What is happening? Jews are turning to all sorts of other religions. They are no longer trusting in God alone.

I suggested last week that the 21st Century is also a time when we find it hard to go on believing in the face of humanistic philosophy. It's a time of crisis for faith in the living God, as we were seeing last week. Then we must beware of the same things happening to us as were happening then in Jerusalem. The religious, even those at the very heart of the Christian religion, will start to look in all sorts of other directions for things to bolster their faith. So we should expect to find religious pluralism in, of all places, denominational headquarters. If the Christian faith appears to be losing ground in the popular culture, let's add . . . What shall we add? – a little bit of faith in the environment? Let's paint Christianity green and see if it will have a little more impact that way. Let's add a little humanism; a little astrology; a little moral re-armament. Let's incorporate a little materialism in a 'prosperity gospel', a 'name-it-and-claim-it' approach to the spiritual life.

It's all done, notice, in the name of mission: trying to make a bigger impact on that great indifferent world out there; longing that it would take a bit more notice of us. So when the going gets tough for faith, we should expect multi-faith services in the cathedrals. (Let's thank God that we don't yet have them here in the Ely diocese.)

But what does God think of them? *'He said to me, "Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger? Look at them putting the branch to their nose! [Incidentally, nobody has a clue what that particular sentence means!] ¹⁸Therefore I will deal with them in anger; I will not look on them with pity or spare them. Although they shout in my ears, I will not listen to them"'* (8:17, 18).

And so, in the next two chapters, (which we're not reading this morning), Ezekiel saw an awful, violent judgement on the city of Jerusalem (in chapter 9), and the glory of God beginning to leave the Temple and the city (in chapter 10). The two are actually the same: God's judgement is God's withdrawal; and God's withdrawal is God's judgement. That truth was seen and heard supremely at one moment in human history, when God's own Son cried out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

As I think we've grasped from chapter 8, the focus in Ezekiel's vision was primarily on the religious failure of the Jerusalem Jews, because that was foundational: what we believe will always ultimately control how we behave in other aspects of our lives. So God had said (back in 8:17 again): *"Have you seen this, son of man? Is it a trivial matter for the house of Judah to do the detestable things they are doing here? Must they also fill the land with violence and continually provoke me to anger?"* You see, detestable religious things were leading to a violent and unjust society in the land. The first half of chapter 11 is on the same theme. Those 25 leaders of the people (11:1) have adopted a particular theological position for political and material gain. They are claiming to be the godly remnant – the choice cuts of meat preserved from the fire in the cooking pot, while the exiles were those under God's judgement. Look at what they were saying according to the end of verse 15 of chapter 11: *"[These] are those of whom the people of Jerusalem have said [the people back in Jerusalem are saying of the ones out in exile], 'They are far away from the LORD; this land was given to us as our possession.'"* If they (those who had been left in Jerusalem) were the ones under God's favour, then they had His blessing to move into the political vacuum created by the deportation of the king and his government. They could now rule the city. And they could also take over the property of those in exile. It was a convenient theological justification for political ambition and material acquisitiveness. Get your theology wrong, and your behaviour will soon start to rot. But in refuting them, through his prophet Ezekiel, God had proclaimed (in the second half of chapter 11) the gospel's glorious cure for religion's rotten core.

2. The Gospel's Glorious Cure

Just notice the wonderful gospel message inserted here in the middle of these awful chapters of judgement that come in the first part of Ezekiel's book: *'The word of the LORD came to me: ¹⁵"Son of man, your brothers – your brothers who are your blood-relatives and the whole house of Israel [that's the real Israelites] – are those of whom the people of Jerusalem have said, 'They are far away from the LORD; this land was given to us as our possession'"* (11:14,15). The apparent blessing of God was in Jerusalem, with the people who had been allowed to stay there. But the reality was that the blessing was with those who were geographically far from the Temple, out in Babylonia. The

spiritual truth was the opposite of the apparent truth – which is very often true in life.

That word ‘sanctuary’ in verse 16 does not mean a place of political safety: **“Therefore say: ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: Although I sent them far away among the nations and scattered them among the countries, yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.’”** It means a meeting place with God. That is what Ezekiel is talking about here. It had taken the people of Israel a long time to realise that the only meeting place with God is the place God commanded them to meet Him. And now they are to grasp that it was actually the obedience that mattered, more than the actual place itself. Because ultimately that meeting place was really not to be a promised land, not to be a chosen city, not to be a holy temple: it was to be a Person – Jesus, the One who said, **“Destroy this temple, and I will raise it again in three days”** (John 2:19). In fact, this statement in verse 16 is without parallel in the Old Testament, as God personalises the place of worship. He has Himself become the place where His people meet. It could be translated like that: not ‘while I have been’, but ‘while I become (or have become)’ a sanctuary, a meeting place for them. Not a temple, not a shrine, but an encounter with the living God. So wherever God is (which is everywhere), they may have access to His presence, because we meet Him by His grace as He reaches out to every one of His created creatures. He longs to relate to every man, every woman, every child.

Notice the outline of the gospel in the verses that follow verse 16. Notice firstly it will be entirely God’s initiative: **“Therefore say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says: I will gather you from the nations and bring you back from the countries where you have been scattered, and I will give you back the land of Israel again’”** (11:17). It will be entirely God’s initiative. He is the rescuer. We are not the savers of ourselves. It took me 20 years to grasp that. I was quite religious, but it had never occurred to me that it was God who had to save: I could not save myself.

Then notice that the past will be dealt with: **“They will return to it [that’s the land] and remove all its vile images and detestable idols”** (11:18). And how much the human spirit longs for that, for the past to be dealt with! And then verses 19 and 20 – the wonderful promise of a new heart and a new relationship with God: **“I will give them an undivided heart [that is not a heart that is trying to be both selfish and Godly. No, an undivided heart: a heart that loves God through and through] and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”** The wonderful promise of the gospel.

My sin, my selfishness, is a heart disease; forgiveness alone is not enough for it; I need a heart transplant, the promise of complete internal regeneration. I believe it is the experience that every converted person here this morning knows to be his or hers, by the grace of God; and every unconverted person here this morning longs for in the depths of his or her being. It is not yet finished in the converted. It’s only begun in this life. But if you’re converted it has begun. God’s Spirit has begun a work of grace in your heart and mine that we could not do for ourselves. He is at work there: and all that disobedience, all that selfishness, all that pride, all that lust and vanity that we battle with day by day – we have His promise that its days are numbered, because His Spirit is living within us; and He will complete the work that He has begun. That’s the wonderful promise of the gospel: not ‘do this and you shall live’, but ‘Christ has done it, and His Spirit will take you there – into eternity and life with God for ever’.

Alas, it’s not where our chapter ends, and I must do justice to the chapter by reading those final verses: **“But as for those whose hearts are devoted to their vile images and detestable idols, I will bring down on their own heads what they have done, declares the Sovereign LORD”** (11:21). Then notice the scene with which the chapter ends: **‘Then the cherubim, with the wheels beside them, spread their wings, and the glory of the God of Israel was above them. ²³The glory of the LORD went up from within the city and stopped above the mountain east of it. ²⁴The Spirit lifted me up and brought me to the exiles in Babylonia in the vision given by the Spirit of God. Then the vision I had seen went up from me, ²⁵and I told the exiles everything the LORD had shown me’** (11:22-25). Ezekiel’s vision ends with the departure of God’s glory from God’s Temple and God’s city. This was the true crisis point as far as Ezekiel was concerned: not the Babylonian capture of the country back in 597 BC, or the Babylonian destruction of the city itself, which is going to follow, in 587 BC. It was the turning point of the departure of God’s glory: a turning point in Israel’s history. And it would have been wholly disastrous as far as Ezekiel and his contemporaries were concerned were it not for verse 16: **‘...yet for a little while I have been a sanctuary for them in the countries where they have gone.’** You see, this great glory symbolising the presence of God moved East, towards Babylon – just a little sign that God is not defeated by His people’s sin. He has got more things to do for them and in them. He has a further way of dealing with us sinners (vv.19-20): **“I will give them an undivided heart and put a new spirit in them; I will remove from them their heart of stone and give them a heart of flesh. ²⁰Then they will follow my decrees and be careful to keep my laws. They will be my people, and I will be their God.”**