

Spiritual Rebuilding III

The Revd Philip Wainwright

Ezra 3.1-7; 20th September 2009

Last week we heard how God acted in the life of the Old Testament church, bringing them out of the wilderness after years in which He had been their only hope. I described that moment as ‘God waving a magic wand’, but I need to expand on that a bit, because I don’t want to leave the wrong impression in anyone’s mind. God did do something that His people could never have done for themselves, but what He did was to give His people a new opportunity to do what they were supposed to do, not do for them what they could and should do for themselves. You’ve all heard the expression ‘God helps those who help themselves’, and I hope you’ve all heard that there is no verse in the Bible that says this! But it is a biblical truth, as long as those who are helping themselves are helping themselves to do God’s will, and we see it in action in these opening chapters of the book of Ezra, which I want to come back to this morning. We read from chapter 3 this morning, but the verses there are the conclusion of the theme that was begun in the reading last week, so let’s explore them in that context, which can be most easily done if you’ll turn to the book of Ezra in your Bibles, p 334 of the pew Bibles, and let’s look.

In the beginning of Ezra 1 the emperor Cyrus told the exiled people they could go home, but he said more than that: he said they should go home and rebuild their temple: v 3, *Anyone of God's people among you—may his God be with him, and let him go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord.* The 'magic wand' was an end to exile and an encouragement to go home and start their spiritual lives over. Please notice that it is, first, spiritual rebuilding: the encouragement is not to go back to Jerusalem and rebuild the city, although that would come eventually, but to go back and rebuild the temple, the symbol of God's presence with His people. Please also notice that it is encouragement and not insistence—God is inspiring not requiring, just what we did at the opening of Sunday School last week! No one is forced to do anything, but those who wanted to get things right spiritually—remembering Jesus's words, *seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things shall be added unto you*—were suddenly given the opportunity to act on that desire.

So for those who are prepared to reorder their lives according to God's priorities, spiritual things first, there comes the dramatic intervention of Cyrus's proclamation. And for those who act on it, there is more help. Cyrus calls on people to help both in cash and in kind: v 4, *And the people of any place where survivors may now be living are to provide [whoever goes] with silver and*

gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem. And people did help, very generously: v 5 mentions some of the people who decide they are going to go to Jerusalem and do this thing God is encouraging them to do, and v 6 says *all their neighbors assisted them with articles of silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with valuable gifts, in addition to all the freewill offerings.* God helping those who are ready to do God's will.

And once the neighbours have shown that they are willing to help, once the whole community is rallying round the cause, there's more help: v 7, *King Cyrus brought out the articles belonging to the temple of the Lord, which Nebuchadnezzar had carried away from Jerusalem* and gave them back. And then there's a list of all those treasures, to the end of the chapter, and that's followed by a whole chapter listing the families who decided to take advantage of the opportunity God had suddenly given them.

Then we get our passage this morning, where we see the first concrete step taken towards rebuilding. Those returning, we were told in Chapter 2, went back to the towns and villages they originally came from, and re-established themselves there, and once they're settled, our passage says they gathered in Jerusalem to begin the business they came for.

What we see is that they not only begin their new life by rebuilding the temple, by putting spiritual things first, but they begin the rebuilding of their spiritual life by rebuilding its most important element. Vv 1 and 2, *The people assembled as one man in Jerusalem. Then Jeshua and his fellow priests and Zerubbabel and his associates began to build the altar of the God of Israel to sacrifice burnt offerings on it, in accordance with what is written in the Law of Moses.* In the Old Testament church, the sacrifices were the most fundamental expression of the people's relationship with God. They were sinners, and the sacrifices atoned for their sins. What they were doing was what had to be done if they wanted to experience atonement of their sins. Their altar was not a thing of beauty, to be adorned by carvings and hangings, but a stone slab on which a fire burned in which the parts of the slaughtered animal were destroyed. Don't confuse it with our altar, which is actually a table where a meal is shared; we call it an altar because of the meal's connection with Christ's sacrifice, but it is not an altar in the Old Testament sense. The altar rebuilt by the first returning exiles was a foreshadowing of the cross, on which Christ would be sacrificed in atonement for the sins of the whole world. How much of this they could have understood at the time is a matter of debate; we'll see when we look at some of the things said by the prophet Zechariah, who was one of the returning exiles, that God said pretty clearly that these events were as

much about the coming Messiah as about coming home from Babylon. But for the moment we just note how they began with what was most important. *Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things shall be added unto you.* Later there would be a temple, and all the beauty and glory associated with it; v 8 might make it sound as though that would be no more than a year or two later, but in fact it was at least seven years later that work on the temple started, when many more exiles had returned. These first seven verses are talking about the pioneers, the very first to arrive home, and the crucial point is their emphasis on the need of sinners for atonement of their sins.

It is at this level that every recovery from disaster and defeat must begin. There is no way out of the disappointments and frustrations and sometimes the sorrows of life in a fallen world except by an acknowledgement of our own fallen nature, repentance of our own sins, and submission to the will of God.

We can be sure that when they were still in Babylon, the exiles confessed their sins and repented of them. But since the atoning sacrifices could only be offered in Jerusalem— that was part of God’s word delivered by the prophets centuries before the exile took place—did that mean that there was no way they could atone for them? No; their sins were atoned for by the death of

Christ, who gave His life as a sacrifice for the sins of all people for all time, even the time before He made His sacrifice. But they couldn't have confidence that their sins were atoned for, without using this sign that God had given them. Because we are human, and not always convinced in our hearts by what we know in our minds to be true, God also gives us a way of bringing this atonement to our hearts as well as our minds. That's what the sacrifices were in the old covenant, a way of giving people confidence that they were forgiven.

When God waved his magic wand and had the Emperor give His people permission to go home, His purpose could only have been to give His people back that confidence. This was the one thing they couldn't have as long as they were in exile. Their offering of the sacrifices before they had even begun to reorganise their common life shows that they understood that before all else, they must get right with God, and that when He finally answer the prayers of those seventy long years, He did so by giving them the opportunity to be sure they were right with God.

That is still, today, God's first answer to the prayers of those in exile, those not living the life they know they were created for. So often what brings someone to church is the hope that God will wave a different magic wand, a wand that will restore our health or save our

marriage or bring sanity to our children or a better job or any job. But what God always does first is to give us the opportunity to atone for our sins, and a way to be confident that we are forgiven, that we are right with God. The way we do that today is not by offering a sacrifice. We know that the sacrifice for our sins has already been offered; it was offered on the cross two thousand years ago, and it was God Who sacrificed Himself for our sins. Without even waiting for our repentance. While we were yet sinners, Christ died for us. The way we apply His sacrifice to our sins is through faith that His sacrifice *does* atone for our sins, and that through Him we can be right with God.

When we're still not confident that God has forgiven us, He has given us an equivalent of those sacrifices that can give us that confidence. The equivalent of the Old Testament sacrifices for Christians is the sacrament of Holy Communion. Sometimes we know in our heads that our sins are atoned for, but we can't quite get it into our hearts. Communion can help when we are in that situation. When the sacrifices for sins were offered under the old covenant, the person offering the sacrifice laid his hand on the animal's head just before it was put to death, as a way of signifying that this sacrifice was for his own sins. When we stretch out our hands for the bread, we are signifying that Christ's sacrifice of Himself is for our own sins, we are applying His

sacrifice to our situation. That's why we teach people not to receive Communion if they were so late for the service that they missed the Confession of sin. We confess our sins, and then we claim Christ's death as the atonement for our sins.

Paul says, when he is explaining the Lord's Supper to the Christians in Corinth who were making a mess of it, 'as often as you eat this bread and drink the cup, you proclaim the Lord's death until He comes.' At the last supper, Jesus proclaimed salvation through His blood to the disciples; at Communion, Jesus's disciples, even you and I, proclaim salvation through His blood to all who will receive it. So our services of Holy Communion are evangelistic services: in them we proclaim the Lord's saving death, and we invite people to come forward and make their own personal response. Let's take advantage of it ourselves this morning, and let's invite others to it as often as we have the opportunity.