

Spiritual Rebuilding IV

Ezra 3.10–4.6

St P's 09

Today you heard a repeat of part of last week's reading, since we didn't get all the way through it last week. We talked about the rebuilding of the altar, and the significance of that, but Cyrus the Emperor, who knew nothing of all that, had told them to rebuild the Temple, and we need to see what happened when they did that. The story began in the last few verses of last week's reading, so for your convenience we read them again and added this week's verses. So let's pick up at v 10, the beginning of the passage printed in the leaflet.

3.10 When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord, the priests in their vestments and with trumpets, and the Levites (the sons of Asaph) with cymbals, took their places to praise the Lord, as prescribed by David king of Israel.

After they had built the altar and reminded themselves of the atonement of their sins though the sacrifices offered on the altar, they began to work on the task that Cyrus had given them, and they laid the foundations of the Temple. It shows just how complete the destruction was that not even the foundation stones were left from the old temple. Not that the Babylonian soldiers who destroyed the temple had dug up the foundations, of course, it doesn't work that way. The army tears a building down and leaves a pile of rubble and moves on;

what happens afterwards is that the locals come and help themselves to the rubble, carting away the stones to build or repair their own homes. The last time I was in Glastonbury I visited the ruins of the abbey in the morning, and slept in the ruins in the evening, because the wall of the hotel I stayed in had been repaired with stones from the ruined abbey—the landlord proudly pointed them out! After seventy years, even the foundation stones had gone, and new ones had to be laid. Notice that they lay the new ones exactly *as prescribed* in I Kings 6, sixty cubits long and twenty cubits wide. They had lost their home seventy years earlier because they had not obeyed God’s word; they are trying hard not to make that mistake again!

3.11 With praise and thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: ‘He is good; his love to Israel endures forever.’ And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord, because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid. 12 But many of the older priests and Levites and family heads, who had seen the former temple, wept aloud when they saw the foundation of this temple being laid, while many others shouted for joy.

Just as today, the laying of a foundation stone is often accompanied by a ceremony of some sort, some dignitary comes and says a few words, and so on, and there is a big crowd gathered for this one. It’s often said that those older people who were weeping were being

faithless, wishing that the old days were back instead of rejoicing that God is doing something new. But I think that's reading into the text something that isn't there. Easy to understand that there would have been tears for those who remembered the original building—the old temple had been a living reality for them in a way it never could be for younger people who had grown up in Babylon. Those older ones were remembering friends and family members killed defending the walls of the temple seventy years earlier, remembering the times they worshipped or prayed in it; who wouldn't shed a tear in its memory at the same time they helped lay the foundations for its successor? I like to think that one day there will be a reconciliation between the two sundered halves of our diocese, and I imagine that our first diocesan worship after such a reconciliation would also be a mixture like that of weeping and joy: a tearful moment for those of us who went through the split, whereas those who will have joined the church later will simply see sudden growth in their new church. How could it be any different? The next verse says 3.13 *No one could distinguish the sound of the shouts of joy from the sound of weeping*, and that mixture of tears and triumph was appropriate.

Both the emotions of that day were felt very deeply, and it's clear that when the Bible talks about shouts of joy, it isn't using words casually. The shout was a loud

one—we tried to teach the children to shout a loud alleluia at our children and parent worship last spring, and will do some more shouting with them in November! *3.13 the people made so much noise. And the sound was heard far away.* Shouts of joy.

But of course the news travelled even farther than the noise did, and however happy a day this was for the returning exiles, others could not tell what it might lead to, and were concerned. No doubt after seventy years a lot of property had been simply taken over and if too many of these people come back it could upset things, a lot of myths perhaps had grown up about the bad old days when Judah was a rebellious nation. Yet here's a funny thing: instead of sabotaging the rebuilding project, they offer to help! *4:1 When the enemies of Judah and Benjamin heard that the exiles were building a temple for the Lord, the God of Israel, 2 they came to Zerubbabel and to the heads of the families and said, "Let us help you build because, like you, we seek your God and have been sacrificing to him since the time of Esarhaddon king of Assyria, who brought us here."* Now because of what happens next, it's important to understand who these people are; they say they were brought here by the king of Assyria, so we know exactly who they are. Remember that after the death of Solomon, the Jewish nation went through a sort of civil war and divided into two nations, a northern kingdom and a southern kingdom. The

northern kingdom of Israel had been conquered by the Assyrians, and the Jews who lived there sent into exile—this was a couple of hundred years before the same thing happened to the southern kingdom of Judah— and the Assyrian king had brought in a new population to replace the lost tribes of the north, and they became a people known as Samaritans. They did worship the God of Israel, but they also continued to worship the gods they had worshipped before they came to Israel. You can read all about it in II Kings 17.24ff: *The new population worshiped the LORD, but they also served their own gods in accordance with the customs of the nations from which they had been brought... They do not fear the LORD nor adhere to the decrees and ordinances, the laws and commands that the LORD gave the descendants of Jacob, whom he named Israel.*

No doubt this offer of help was sincere and well-meant, but because it came from people who did not worship God the way He says in His word he wants to be worshipped, the returning exiles could not accept their help. They didn't want to make the mistakes they had made earlier, and one way of avoiding that is to choose your friends carefully. Choose friends who are the kind of people you want to be like, not just anyone who happens to be friendly, because you will sooner or later become like them. And it was becoming people who worshipped more than one God that led to them being

carried into captivity. They had disobeyed the very first of the Ten Commandments; do you remember it? *I am the Lord your God who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of bondage. You shall have no other gods but Me.* They knew that their disobedience of that commandment had led to all the problems they had suffered, so this time they will not make a close friendship, or enter a partnership with those who do that, in case they become like them. They have learned their lesson.

So we read that 4.3 *Zerubbabel, Jeshua and the rest of the heads of the families of Israel answered, “You have no part with us in building a temple to our God. We alone will build it for the Lord, the God of Israel, as King Cyrus, the king of Persia, commanded us.”* It was actually a polite answer; sorry, the king told us to do it, you’re not under this same commandment and he’s your king too now, so you’d better let us do it alone. A polite answer, and a true answer, but I don’t think it was the real reason for their determination to do this work alone.

But as always happens, when you are determined to do things by God’s word instead of by human standards, the people who don’t agree with you about the importance of God’s word don’t just disagree, they resent you and try to make sure you don’t live by God’s word. 4 *Then the peoples around them set out to discourage*

the people of Judah and make them afraid to go on building. 5 They hired counselors to work against them and frustrate their plans during the entire reign of Cyrus king of Persia and down to the reign of Darius king of Persia.

It's funny how people react when you're determined to live by the moral commandments instead of just the ceremonial ones. Tell people you've given up chocolate for Lent and they'll apologise for tempting you; tell them you won't see a popular movie because it glorifies adultery or greed, and they will try to persuade you you're being over-sensitive, and if you stick to your principles they act as though you've personally insulted them. Some of us have lost friends that way—but better to follow the guidance of God's word even if it costs us. Let's stand up for what we know to be right. *Seek first the kingdom of God, and everything else you need will be added unto you.*

There's plenty of lessons to take away from this passage today, but I think it's that one more than any other that's needed today. Only God wants you to be a serious Christian; everyone else, except other serious Christians of course, wants you to stop being such a puritan or some worse name. Don't be so self-righteous, they'll say. But it's God's righteousness that's in the Bible, and that's what's threatening to them, that you put that above the customs and values of the society we live in.

People will try to discourage you. And when you're trying to recover from some defeat or some spiritual exile, getting discouraged is easy. But stick to what you know to be right. Don't listen to the discouragers. Listen instead to God as He encourages you—*Seek first the kingdom of God, and all these other things will be added unto you.* All you're trying to achieve in accordance with God's word will come in God's good time.

May the words of my mouth, and the meditations of all our hearts, be always acceptable in Thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer; Amen.

*The Revd Philip Wainwright
St Peter's Brentwood*