

I can't escape the irony that I started to prepare this sermon to be part of our Annual Meeting, in which I was hoping to look forward to a new dawn after Covid, and here I am isolating at home having caught the virus!

I hope that, even with the change in my circumstances, we will still be able to see the parallels between the people of Ezra 3, people who we were introduced to in February, and who have now been back in Israel for a few months as they gather in Jerusalem for the great Festival of Tabernacles, and us, who have been living under various restrictions for the last two years, but are at least looking forward to being able to gather and worship more freely once again.

More than that I think there is a parallel between the rebuilding of the Temple that is at the heart of the book of Ezra, from the moment we read King Cyrus' decree in chapter 1: "The Lord, the God of heaven, has...appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem" and us, as we seek to rebuild the church, NOT, and I can't emphasise this enough, NOT the bricks and mortar, however good it is that we have improved our church hall and have plans to improve the church, but our rebuilding is of the PEOPLE OF GOD, deepening our faith and reaching out to share that faith with our community, friends, family, neighbours, colleagues, all the people that we know.

I have split Ezra 3 into 2 sections, each with 3 points, so we will begin with v1-6 looking in turn at the Seventh Month, Daily Worship and High Days & Holy Days; before moving to v7-13 and looking at the Flow of History, Leaders & Workers, and finally Praise & Thanksgiving.

#### **A. Ezra 3.1-6.            1) The Seventh Month**

The events of Ezra 3 happen according to v1 in the "seventh month", this could just be a detail, as we might say 'I went on holiday in July', except that, in the Jewish calendar, the seventh month, around September or October, is a month of festivals including Trumpets, the Day of Atonement, and Tabernacles, lasting for eight days from the 15<sup>th</sup> day of the 7<sup>th</sup> month.

The Festival of Tabernacles has a double focus, a celebration of the harvest having been safely gathered in, a theme linked to creation, and how important would gathering in the harvest have been for these people who had returned to the land and would need a good harvest to see them through the coming winter; but the festival was also a reminder of the exodus from Egypt with the people living in tabernacles, booths or shelters, a theme that is linked to salvation

Both harvest and exodus, creation and salvation, have a future aspect as well, we look forward to the harvest at "the close of the age" and also to following Jesus on his new exodus from earth to heaven.

The Festival of Tabernacles was also one of the great pilgrim feasts, when people travelled to Jerusalem, described by Ezra in a typically low-key way: "the people assembled together as one".

We can imagine the mixed emotions of these returning exiles, joy at making the first pilgrimage back to the Holy City since the exile, but their joy would be mixed with sorrow at the state of that city, and especially of the temple.

One of the things we missed in the lockdowns of the last two years was the ability to “assemble together” and we must rejoice now that most of you are able to do so again! We should remember how much we missed meeting together when we were not allowed to do so, and if we are tempted not to come to church, or we find other things are making it more difficult, we should use those memories of being locked out of church to increase our resolve, not simply for our own benefit but for the sake of others, because it was not just being in church that we missed, but being in fellowship with one another - we worship God together.

## **2) Daily Worship**

We move on to consider the how the returning exiles re-establish a pattern of daily worship. They “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”.

Once again we see the important link with the past, not only the Law of Moses, but also to Solomon’s Temple that had stood on this spot, and before that to the altar Abraham had built in this land to show his faith in God’s promises. Now these descendants of Abraham were reclaiming the land by rebuilding the altar, a symbol of God’s presence, God’s promises and God’s protection.

Burnt offerings were a daily act of worship involving a sacrifice that was “burnt”, leaving nothing to be consumed.

It was an offering of the worshipper to God and a sign of the worshipper’s acceptance by God, because the sacrifice was a daily act of atonement to remove sin and turn away God’s anger, and in doing so points forward to the sacrifice of Christ.

As we think about how we worship today it is not just what we do when we gather in church, but what each one of us does every day, as George Herbert wrote: “seven whole days, not one in seven, I will praise thee”.

We all need to make time in our days for God when we, like the returning exiles, make a sacrificial offering to God, in our case the sacrifice being of our time, and when we have a daily act of atonement by confessing our sin and claiming the cleansing of Christ’s sacrifice.

Robert Fyall, in his commentary on Ezra, wrote that: “At this new beginning the returned exiles reaffirm their faith in the Lord of creation and history”. As we rejoice in the many possibilities of a world coming out of Covid restrictions, at least for those of you who are not infected, we must reaffirm our faith in the Lord of creation and history too.

These people put God first by rebuilding the altar when so much else needed rebuilding, and by making those daily, sacrificial, burnt offerings; what will we do to reaffirm our faith and to put God first in our lives?

## **3) High Days & Holy Days**

Daily worship had begun and so, with the Festival of Tabernacles, had festival worship, the worship for High Days and Holy Days; this is so important, for them with their monthly New Moon sacrifices, as well as a yearly calendar of appointed sacred festivals of the Lord. They had a mixed diet of worship, something each and every day to sustain them, but interspersed with special celebrations, so worship never became dull and mechanical.

It is worth commenting about the freewill offerings the exiles are said to make, these are in addition to the offerings called for in the daily, monthly and annual calendar, they are spontaneous outpourings of love for God.

At this point I must say a big thank you to all those who have given gifts to the church, especially over these difficult last two years, as spontaneous outpourings of love for God.

We also have a calendar for our worship, presently we are in the season of Lent, with opportunity to do something extra for the Lord, followed by Holy Week and Easter with their special celebrations, before Ascension and Pentecost, and later in the year, seasons of remembrance, Advent, and Christmas, providing a rhythm to our worship.

For the returning exiles following this pattern of worship was about obedience to God's word it was "in accordance with what is written", "required" and "prescribed", this was vital for them because it was the disobedience of their ancestors that led to the exile.

We may not have the same detailed instructions about how to worship in God's word, there is no mention of Lent, for example, in Scripture, but we do need to make sure that God's word is at the heart of our worship, and that we live our whole lives governed by what the word of God says, and not by the loudest voices in the society around us.

Ezra tells us that "Despite their fear of the peoples around them, they built the altar" so we should maintain our life of worship and continue to teach the Word of God, in spite of what the world may say, and in order to build the church today.

## **B. Ezra 3.7-13            1) Flow of History**

We move now to the second part of my sermon, looking at v7-13, beginning with the flow of history.

This involves noting how the preparations for the re-building of the Temple were similar to those made for the building of Solomon's temple, while also recognising that, in this present moment, they were still subject to King Cyrus.

Looking back is something we can profitably do, there is much encouragement from realising how God has blessed us in the past, and continues to do so in the present.

Linda's account of how God answered her prayers for a house were a wonderful example of that, and I hope they will not be the last such example we hear about...

The Temple, like the Tabernacle in the desert during the exodus, was built to God's plan, and as such it points not only back to the previous Temple, but also forward to heaven. In heaven there will be no temple, because God will live there with his people, and it will be far more glorious than anything we can imagine.

We need to see our lives, and the state of the world we live in, coming out of Covid, war in Europe, as well as our own personal struggles, as part of the flow of history from creation to the glory and wonder of heaven, because if we keep focussed on heaven we will cope with the storm, however terrifying it may be.

## **2) Leaders & Workers**

In v8-9 we read about how the work on re-building began in earnest, under the leadership of Zerubbabel and Joshua,

"the rest of the people (the priests and the Levites and all who had returned from the captivity to Jerusalem) began the work."

We are called to build the church today, and remember that doesn't involve us in bricks and mortar but in deepening people's faith to strengthen our spiritual foundations, and reaching out to share our faith, to build on those foundations with more and more people coming to faith.

Our model for building must be the same.

I will try and provide leadership, especially when I am not stuck at home,  
but I can't build the church on my own  
any more than Zerubbabel and Joshua could build the temple on their own,  
you all have a part to play, as Ezra 3 goes on to say "working on the house of God".

There is one other comment I must make from these verses,  
and it concerns who they appointed to supervise the building of the house of the Lord.  
We might think it would be those who had seen the old Temple,  
but, as we will hear in a moment, they were not the best people,  
instead it was "Levites twenty years old and older".

We must value young people in our church, we must give them responsibility,  
we must listen to them and, always under the guidance of God's word,  
we must see how they would build the church of today,  
so that it can better serve the needs of tomorrow.

I have spoken before about the need to have more people in their 20's and 30's in the church,  
as we move through the 2020s and 2030s,  
it is already 2022 and, if I was with you, I would look around to see how well, or otherwise,  
we are doing - you can look around now...

Let's build for the future, all joining in and sharing the work, guided by God, and the young!

### **3) Praise & Thanksgiving**

In our final section the priests and Levites, the trumpets and cymbals, "with praise and  
thanksgiving they sang to the Lord: 'He is good; his love towards Israel endures for ever.'  
And all the people gave a great shout of praise to the Lord,  
because the foundation of the house of the Lord was laid."

After what may, at times, have seemed quite heavy going we come to this almost  
spontaneous outpouring of praise - it was "as prescribed by David"  
but as we have seen it was so important for the returning exiles to link with their past,  
as they completed the first stage of their rebuilding project, laying the foundations.  
God's goodness and love are themes that run right through Scripture,  
so it should be no surprise that they are picked up here.

We would do well to follow their example and, when we have news to celebrate, let's shout,  
when someone joins the church, let's sing;  
when someone discovers the joy of God's word, let's shout;  
when someone is inspired by the Holy Spirit, let's sing;  
when someone commits to following Jesus, let's sing and shout!

But, and I'm afraid there is a but, songs and shouts are easy,  
what counts is long term faithful love and sacrificial service, to build the church today.

The returning exiles' joy was short lived,  
even as the shouts of joy rang out - others wept,  
because the scale of this new temple was nothing like that of Solomon's Temple,  
and beyond that, as we look into chapter 4 which we will return to after Easter in May,  
we see that opposition frustrated their building beyond the laying of these foundations.

Let us not start building the church today with praise and thanksgiving and finish in tears,  
but let us start and **continue** with praise, thanksgiving and joy.  
Notice I didn't say finish because, unlike a temple,  
the church is not finished until God says it is, and Jesus returns,  
until then, we are all called to carry on building, together.