

Sermon
12 May 2019
West Kirk of Calder & Polbeth Harwood

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Reading: Ezra 3:1-13

It was the year 537BC. The Israelites have been living in captivity in Babylonia for 50 years. This was a very dark time in the history of the people of God.

Remember that this is long before the time of Jesus. The Israelites believed that God was present in the temple, but the temple was in ruins, they were far away from home, and they felt far away from God too.

This was of course the result of their own doing, because God warned them time and time again that they would be taken into exile if they didn't change their ways and worship him alone... But they didn't listen.

So the inevitable happened. But God is a God of grace, and he promised that one day they would be able to go back home. And when the Persians became the new world rulers, their king, Cyrus, made this dream come true for them.

Can you imagine what they must have felt like while they were in exile? 50 years is a long time. Most people only lived till they were about 40

years old in those days. So many of the people returning “home” were actually born in captivity. But they grew up hearing the stories of the glorious temple in Jerusalem and what life was like in the good old days...

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I understand a little about not living in the place I was born in, but it’s different for me, because I *chose* to come live here. And after 11 years in Scotland, going to South Africa to visit my family is *just that* – a visit. I’m not going “home” in July, because *this* is my home now.

But every single time we go to South Africa I see changes. It feels different. After *11 years* I do not feel at home there anymore, I sometimes can’t even believe I grew up there. So what will it feel like 40 years from now?

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In any case, these people were kept alive by the hope that one day they would be able to go back home again.

But the home they returned to was not the home they left behind. There was nothing but ruins. There was nothing left of the amazing temple King Solomon built, and they were heartbroken and deeply disappointed.

But what did they do?

They realized that they have been given a 2nd chance. And they decided that they were not going to waste it!

So the very 1st thing they did, was to build an altar for God, a place where they could bring sacrifices and show their dedication to God.

And then, they lay the foundations to rebuild the temple.

They were not only getting their priorities right by laying the foundations for the temple soon after their arrival back home, they also decided to build their new lives on the right foundations from the outset.

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I would like to share a few interesting facts with you:

- The Old Testament books Ezra and Nehemiah describe the history of Israel between 539BC until around 428BC. These two books were originally seen as one, and together with Chronicles it forms one large historical work.
- Ezra mentions that there were about 50 000 Israelites who returned to Jerusalem during this time. Historians are unsure whether this is factual, or an exaggeration to indicate how big a miracle it was that the people of God could return home.
- After their return home, the Israelites assembled in the 7th month – called Tisri, our September/October, which was an important month in their calendar, because to them it marked the start of the new year, thus indicating a new beginning; and it was the month in which they celebrated the Feast of the Tabernacles, a joyous festival celebrating God's care and protection.
- They started laying the foundations of the temple on the 2nd month of the 2nd year, which is interestingly also the same month in which Solomon started building the first temple, and this makes sense because by the 2nd month, which is our April/May, the month after the Passover, the dry season started and the harvest would have been brought in, so it would be a good time to do building work.
- The Levites had to supervise, because they knew the instructions as to how to build the temple from the Word of God.

- Once the foundation was laid, the Levites took their cymbals and the priests their trumpets to praise God. The priests only took up their trumpets like this for very special occasions, which this obviously was.

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And then, in the last verse of this passage, we read that the older people, who still worshipped in the former temple, wept aloud; while the younger people, who never had a temple before, shouted for joy.

The older people were moved to tears, because they knew what they lost, and they were thankful that it would be restored again. But there would also have been those who were disappointed that this temple would be smaller and not as impressive as the one Solomon built.

And all these years later, I think being in church still has the same effect on us! Sometimes during Sunday worship, but always at a funeral, a baptism, a wedding... Maybe it's a hymn that triggers it, maybe just the atmosphere, but the tears come easily here at the church: sad tears, happy tears, and lots of smiles, sometimes even giggles too. If we are celebrating happy occasions, memories of past losses are powerfully evoked; and at sad occasions we can't help but remember the special times too.

Human beings, as far as we know, are the only creatures who cry to express emotion, and research has shown that different types of tears have different chemical compositions. Tears to lubricate the eyes and tears caused by irritation are different from tears caused by happiness or sadness, which are again different from each other.

People often stay away from church when they think they may cry and cause embarrassment; but this passage shows how our deepest feelings can be offered to God as part of our worship.

Why? Because a church is a very special place. The people in Old Testament times believed that the temple was the only place they could meet God. Jesus taught us that God is everywhere, but still – this is the place we can seek out to be close to him, and to do that in the company of fellow-believers can be a life-changing experience.

As human beings we need to feel rooted and grounded to feel safe. And your house and your church are the 2 places this can happen. Maybe that is why so many people are just drifting through life these days, because they don't know that being part of a church can be your anchor...

But if we want this special building to be here for many more generations to come, we'll have to tell people about it. We have to show them what it means to us! Because we don't want next generations to feel as hopeless as the Israelites in exile...

So let's do things right. Let's learn for the Israelites of old.

God gave them a 2nd chance. And this time round, they did it right.

This story is about rebuilding, restoring.

Have you ever felt that your whole life has fallen apart? Have you ever wished that things could just again be the way they used to be?

That's exactly what the Israelites must have felt like.

But they decided to not fall into self-pity, and cry over 'has-beens' and 'what-ifs'. They decided to rebuild and restore.

And it was hard. It took a very long time. And the people around them didn't make it easy for them. But they did it.

Let's do the same. Let's build our lives on the foundations of the Word of God.

A new beginning is never easy. But with God in your life, it's possible. If there is one thing we learn about God in this story, it is that He gives 2nd chances.

So if you have made a mess of your life – walk away from it and start rebuilding.

If things out of your control has turned your live to ruins – accept what you can't change and work with what you can – and start rebuilding.

And praise God through your tears and in your joy. The Israelites praised God with so much passion that the sound could be heard far away – and this was after the foundations were laid, long before the actual temple was built. True faith praises God even before the answer has materialised...

And let's not only do that with our lives, but with our church too. Let's open these doors and invite people in. Because this is a special place.

Research indicates that people's attachment to their own church buildings are powerful and real. And I know this very well, because every single time we get visitors from South Africa I bring them here to show them MY church.

Let's remind the people out there in our village that this is not only a place for funerals and weddings, but that there is seats available for them here on a Sunday, so that they can laugh with us, cry with us, and be loved with us.

Our older people might cry about the way things were in the past, but let's get the younger people enthusiastic about church, like it happened in our story. Even if this means that church has to look a little different to what we are used to.

It's hard to rebuild for the future if we have no concept of what the future may be... But that doesn't mean that we should do nothing!

Maybe, if people start realising what an amazing place a church can be, this broken world we live in, can be rebuilt, and this time – on the right foundations.

Amen