

TJW, HT, 25.January.09, 9.15am & 11am,

Ezra chapter 3

It often helps at the beginning of a sermon you to know what that sermon is intended to have done for you by the end.

All our sermons aim to be a faithful preaching of what God says to us in his Word in the Bible.

And in the Bible God doesn't just give us information. His Word has a power - it's the crucial tool that God the Holy Spirit uses to transform us - to change us in heart and mind from who we are to who we should be.

Now we're spending these few Sundays listening to what God is saying through the book of Ezra, in the Old Testament. Today we've got to chapter 3, and I recommend that you have it open ready, because soon we'll be looking at it together.

So here are four of the things that God is going to use this part of his Word to do in us.

First: If you ever feel that your life as a Christian is too small and puny ever to make much of an impact in an unbelieving world... if you feel the same about Holy Trinity with our plans to launch "4 o'clock church" - then God will want to lift your eyes to something greater he's doing.

Second: If you struggle to make much sense of the Old Testament, there should be something here to help you.

Third: If you think that God is all angry in the Old Testament, and then when Jesus turns up he calms down and becomes all loving, then you should see that you're missing something major in the Bible.

And finally, if you need your hope renewed that Jesus really is the one and only place we can go to, to get ourselves sorted out with God - then God will want to do that here, too.

That's where we're heading.

And we need to start by remembering what's going on here in the book of Ezra. Because this is history - taking place about five hundred years before Jesus was born.

God's people in Israel had been defeated by the powerful army from Babylon, off to the north-east. God had made it happen as his judgment on them, because they had kept disobeying him.

The worst of it was, their city of Jerusalem and their temple had been demolished. But now, about 60 years later, God made a new king let some of them go back to rebuild their city and their temple.

And this is where we join them in chapter 3. You'll see from the headings in the chapter that here they're rebuilding - rebuilding the altar and the temple.

When the work gets going, do you see what they shout out to God in verse 11? [READ verse 11b].

Whatever else God does for you in this, he's aiming to show us that he good - and that his love for his people endures for ever.

He does it here, first, by showing us how **God restored the sacrifices - the way we come to God.**

The first thing they rebuild is the altar. And they start making the sacrifices at the altar, just like they used to before. Do you see that in verse 2 of chapter 3? [READ].

They were able to worship just the way they had before, in the time of Moses, exactly as God had instructed.

And it was God who had restored it for them, when he brought them back home to Jerusalem.

If there's anything spiritual in our lives that needs to be put straight, it's only God who can do it for us. The entire Bible is the story of human beings making a spiritual and moral mess of the world, and God continually at work to restore us.

Do you see how merciful and kind God is to his people - even right here in the Old Testament? He doesn't change character half-way through the Bible.

(That was one of the four things that God wants to do through this passage.)

But now - isn't it a bit odd that they build the altar and start doing all the sacrifices there before they build the rest of the temple round it?

You might think that that was like having an extension for a brand new kitchen built on the side of your house - with the builders starting by setting up the cooker in the open air - and expecting you to make your dinner on it, before they'd put up the walls and put the roof on.

But do you see that the altar was the very heart of what God was teaching his people before Jesus came.

God had told them exactly about all the animals that had to be sacrificed there.

The blood of the animals needed to be poured out, for the people's rebellion against God to be wiped out and forgiven.

Was it brutal? You could say that, yes, in a way it was.

But it's the key way that God shows us how serious the problem between us and him is.

You see, when we, as God's creatures, rebel against what he says, and want to be in charge of our own lives - death is the only right punishment. He's the originator of our lives - the source of life - and if we turn away from him, we turn away from life, and choose spiritual death instead. And if there's one thing that's true about dead people, it's this: they can't bring themselves back to life.

The sacrifices that God gave his people make this brutally clear.

But the sacrifices weren't in the end brutal. They were signs of God's mercy. You see, the sacrifices were a substitute for the people. It was the blood of the sacrifices - instead of the blood of the people.

God was teaching them that he would be the one to be merciful enough to open up the way for them to be restored back to him.

Yet this rebuilding of the altar in Ezra was pointing only towards something even greater: that Christ is the once-for-all sacrifice. Keep a finger here in Ezra, and turn on a long way to the book of Hebrews - chapter 9, verse 13-14 [READ].

Jesus was the sacrifice for sin that ended all sacrifices.

The death of animal can never really substitute for the death that we owe for our sin - because animals aren't people.

But the Son of God can be your substitute - he really can die your spiritual death for you, so you don't have to - because as well as being God he was also a proper human being like us.

If you take out a bank loan but can't afford the full repayments, you might send the odd cheque in to pay a bit off - but the interest just keeps building up and the debt goes on.

What you dream of is someone to sacrifice their own money, and pay it off for you. That would wipe the debt out.

That's what Jesus has done for you. That's why he had to die a brutal death for you.

That's why, in a few minutes' time, we can take our Gift Day envelopes and offer ourselves confidently in God's service - because his death has completely freed us up to serve the living God without fear - with our consciences clean.

That was another thing, wasn't it, that God wants to do through this reading - to give us this hope and confidence, because of Jesus.

But actually there still is one sort of sacrifice that God continues to want from us Christians.

Turn back a few pages from Hebrews, to Romans 12.1 [READ verses 1-2].

God wants our whole lives as a sacrifice.

The one-off sacrifice of Jesus' death sorts out the sin that cuts us off from God. And then we're free to offer ourselves - all our talents, our opportunities, every circumstance we find ourselves in - all of it offered to God, saying - as Jesus once said - "Not my will, but yours be done."

'Living sacrifices' don't always go where they want to go, or do what makes them feel comfortable.

It's going to feel like it costs us something, isn't it, to be a proper "living sacrifice".

So do you also see how much more sense Jesus makes to us, when we see him as the climax of the story of God's mercy in action, that was God was building in the Old Testament?

That was another of the four things that God will use this passage to do.

Now, back in Ezra 3 - we've seen how God restored the sacrifices. Then he tells us how **God restored the temple building itself** - which stood for **his presence with his people**.

Look at verse 7 [READ].

But why does the Bible bother to tell us where they got all the materials for building the temple from?

The reason is this. It came mostly from the same places that King Solomon got the materials from, to build the first temple. We know that because that's recorded earlier in the Bible.

So in these details God is telling us that he was at work, restoring what had been destroyed.

That's why some of the people shouted for joy, when they saw the foundations being laid.

Now the temple symbolised God's presence with his people.

And just as the altar pointed forward to Jesus, so too did the temple.

Because **Jesus is the real 'temple'**.

Turn on again to the New Testament, John chapter 2, verse 18 [READ verses 18-21].

Jesus talks about his body as the temple. And in fact the temple-building was destroyed by the Romans in AD70 - forty years after his resurrection. It was never rebuilt - it never needed to be -

because the presence of God was no longer in a building, but was now in a man - in the Son of God.

You don't find God in buildings, however special they look. You find him in Jesus.

But the idea of the 'temple' doesn't stop with Jesus.

Because he sends his Holy Spirit into everyone who trusts in him, we Christians are called 'the temple' in the Bible, just like him.

Turn on once more, to 1 Peter, chapter 2, verse 4 [READ verses 4-5].

WE are the temple, where the Spirit of God dwells.

God has filled us with his Spirit so that we can be for the world what the temple was in Israel - the place where people would come, and be amazed by the beauty, and say: "God is here."

Every Sunday all the bricks of the temple meet together here - and from March some of them will meet in the Trinity Centre at 4pm - and every week we scatter throughout Hinckley and beyond - but still as living stones, in the house which God is building.

God restored the sacrifices and the temple in Israel.

And then he came as Jesus, the perfect sacrifice and the true temple.

And if we're in him, we can sacrifice ourselves for him, and be the people where he is present in his world.

But yet... there's one more thing to say, from Ezra chapter 3. And you might think that it's bit of an anti-climax.

Read the last couple of verses, back in Ezra 3 - verse 12 [READ verses 12-13].

Amid the joy of the temple being rebuilt, those who had seen the old one, sixty years earlier, wept. And they wept because they knew that the new one wasn't going to be as glorious as the last one. They'd been decimated by the exile in Babylon. They were much smaller in number now.

Had the glory of God's presence with actually gone now?

You can hear the oldies saying: "Oh, they don't build temples like they used to! Back in my day...!". Only this time, they were right! There was joy - but also disappointment.

And is that not exactly how it can feel for us Christians?

We have the joy of knowing Christ, forgiven through him - yet we know that the present isn't all it should be. Our sin is not fully erased from our lives - we know that the world does not always see the glory of God in us as clearly as it could.

And maybe we look at our own lives - or at our plans as a church family - and say, "It's OK - but it's so small and puny."

But back then, when the temple was being re-built, God used two prophets around at the time, to stop them moaning. They were Haggai, and Zechariah - and the words of both of them are in the Bible. Do read their books later today, to fill in the picture.

Zechariah said: "Don't despise the day of small things."

Why? Because God often does the 'big' thing through the 'small' thing.

This less impressive temple was God's last step before Jesus, the true temple, came. But even when he came he didn't look very impressive to many.

But he is the great sacrifice - he is the true temple - and one day he will return to vindicate all who have called him Lord.

And on that day no one will ever be able to say again say again: "It isn't as good as it used to be." (Which will be a big relief all round.)

So we don't despise the day of small things.

We don't despise what God has done for us in Christ - even though we're still longing for him to come and finish what he's started in us. And we don't despise the seemingly small things that he enables us to do for him.

That may be the great thing that God wants to do in us this morning. Because he is the God who chooses to restore - to restore people to himself - and he chooses to do it according to his wisdom, not ours.