

Sunday 24th January 2021 – Ezekiel 8

John Wood – What God Hates

I am speaking to you from my home thinking of those few left in the actual church building back in Eaton Socon which I assume is almost empty. In some ways **I am in voluntary lockdown exile from you all**. It is a small way of helping me think of the situation Ezekiel is in as we approach this passage. **Here he is miles away from Jerusalem where he has visions of the temple and what is going on around it**. The analogy breaks down of course since Ezekiel did not have the option of a return whereas I could have jumped into the car this morning and driven the 6 or so miles. As you watch online this morning **I hope our separation emphasises the true nature of the church, the body of Christ called out to be his people in this world and not focused on a building. In our lockdown we can perhaps get a glimpse of what Ezekiel felt like.**

Tim said at the start of this series that Ezekiel is probably not well known apart from the vision of the valley of dry bones which we will meet later. I was a **student** when I first read the whole of Ezekiel. I was following the three-year bible course called **“Search the Scriptures”** which was designed for students who, in those days, did three-year degree courses. The study on Ezekiel comes up in year 3 and I remember the impact when I first read the beginning of the book. The picture of the Glory of God which moved in **three dimensions like a drone** with wheels on that could move and be anywhere. A picture of both the glory of God and his universal presence. I used to have to go to **Pasadena in the US to visit the Jet Propulsion Laboratory of NASA**. One time I was taken to see prototypes for a **Mars Rover**. It had wheels that meant it could move in any direction but only on a two- a dimensional surface. The actual rover will be launched in July this year and you can see a 3D version of it on the NASA website. It **predated the idea of SpaceTime** of Einstein by several centuries. Ezekiel is about **primary colours. Big visions and big messages**. Nothing is held back as we shall see.

Chapter 8 which we read is sandwiched between two vivid chapters which illustrate this. In chapter 7 we read the following: **“Disaster. An unheard disaster is coming. The end has come! The end has come! Doom has come upon you – you who dwell in the land. The time has come, the day is near; there is panic, not joy upon the mountain. I am about to pour out my wrath on you and spend my anger on you: I will judge you according to your conduct and repay you for all your detestable practices.”** I will come to chapter 9 later when we get a glimpse of what God was proposing to actually do.

So, with this as a suitable trailer as we find Ezekiel quietly sitting at home on a specific day which I am told is **the 17th September 592**. Why are we told this specific date? We find in **chapter 24** that Ezekiel is told to record another date so his prophecy can be linked to certain events that are happening at the same time in

Jerusalem. It links his **vision to a specific time and specific place that can be verified.**

Here we find the elders of Judah sitting facing him. Later on in **Ezekial (ch 33) we read “My people come to you as they usually do, and sit before you to listen to your words, but they do not put them into practice...Indeed to them you are nothing more than one who sings love songs with a beautiful voice....for they hear your words and do not put them into practice. When all this becomes true, and it surely will, then they will know that a prophet has been amongst them.”**

You can imagine them sitting in the sunshine wanting reassurance that what God has said in the preceding isn't really going to happen is it. **“You have fertile imagination Ezekiel. We know God is in his temple and all will be well. Tone it down a bit.”**

At this point Ezekiel sees a vision of the Glory of God which he describes as a **man coming out of fire and glowing as heated metal.** As an undergraduate I was sponsored by **British Steel** and my first summer vacation I had to work in a steel works outside Sheffield on the furnaces where so-called special steels were made. There is something awesome about seeing 150 tonnes of molten steel at around 1700 Celsius being poured into a ladle after 5 hours of being cleaned up. The noise and heat are incredible. We had to **wear special dark glasses** even to look at the metal. In addition, we had to regularly take salt tablets.

In Exodus 34 we find that God's glory is such that no one can look on it and live. **Moses has to hide behind a rock as God's glory passes by.** Last week Tim said that the living creatures surrounding God's glory protected Ezekiel from seeing directly. We speak of God's holiness, often in a casual way such as when we say the Lord's prayer. We say “hallowed be your name.” and then quickly move on. Yet we are asserting God's holiness and our status before a holy God. It is an awesome statement we make.

So, Ezekiel **sees the purity and holiness of God in his vision.** He is transported **back to the temple in Jerusalem** in his vision where the picture he has of God's glory he had back in chapter 1 is there. Some years ago, Ali and I were prison visitors in Bedford prison. One thing I remember the chaplain telling us before we started. **“Remember you are not taking God into the prison, he is already there for you to reveal his presence.”** Although the Glory of God is envisaged by Ezekiel as something finite because that is all he can take in, the overarching message in this book and **throughout the bible is that God in his glory is ever present.**

We find Ezekiel in and around the temple where he is **shown four scenarios.** **Notice he does not tell Ezekiel what is going on, he asks him to look, to observe.** Time and again throughout the Old Testament God asks people what

they see. Likewise, Jesus in the New Testament frequently asks questions. And if nothing else sticks in your mind let the questions that God asks Ezekiel challenge you and me. **“What do you see?”**

There is considerable debate about whereabouts in the temple that these visions take place. What is obvious is that none of them take place in the centre where the Jews believed that God’s glory actually resided. **They are all on the periphery.** An observer looking on from outside the temple area might think that these are true worshipers worshiping. While all this is going on we get the impression that God has departed leaving a vacuum. The same is true today. To the outsider it might seem a lot is going on inside a church building but it is in fact hollow. A lot is going on which for us might **be churchiness or religious practices that appear to be in God’s name but where God is not present.**

The actual scenarios are not that easy to interpret and some allude to parts of the Torah which while interesting do not enlighten us much. They all refer to **idol worship of some kind.** One of the first things we notice is that it includes the **whole House of Israel, the elders, women and men equally. No one escapes.** They are using the cover of the Temple to pretend they are worshiping God.

First, we come across the **idol of jealousy.** What does this mean? It could refer to the idea of being **jealous of the lifestyles and resources that others of no faith enjoy.** This was certainly the case for Israel who **kicked against the provisions God supplied in the wilderness saying they were better off as slaves in Egypt.** For us, perhaps it could be the fact that we do not give with joy but rather give in a begrudging way. It is easy to think others are having a better time than oneself. Or as the expression goes, **the grass always looks greener on the other side.** Of course, it is easy to feel smug about this. I have no interest whatsoever in **cars, football, so called celebrities** but I can get very **jealous of those who are brighter than I am.** I move in circles with some of the brightest people in the planet, some speak several languages. Yet during my last staff appraisal at Nottingham University the deputy vice-chancellor surprised me by saying **people will be jealous of what I had achieved.**

Even within Christian circles jealousy rears its ugly head. Personally, I have to stop myself being jealous of those who can **worship through singing for which I have no talent.** I have to remind myself of the story of the **Juggler of Notre Dame in Paris who could not take part in the liturgy and ended up juggling before God.** I have other God given gifts that I can bring to worship.

I am reminded of someone from the church Ali and I attended in **Cambridge.** One member of the congregation had **severe communication difficulties and was very unwell.** Yet he wanted to contribute to worship using his hands. He decided to make a **puppet theatre** and he used to invite me round to see how it was progressing. It was beautiful with a sounds system incorporated into the stage. **He**

wanted it to convey a biblical story so he got others to record the words and one Sunday he did the whole performance before the youngsters in the church. It was a most moving experience. Shortly after he died and I like to think that making that theatre was his final gift to us and to God.

The next scenario is one of what goes on **behind closed doors**. I take it we are all **decent people, what you see is what you get or is it?** Here the leaders of Israel are **pretending to be priests, using incense to worship the drawings of animals** just out of sight from where the actual priests were meant to be the only ones who could swing incense in the presence of God in the temple. **Notice the subtlety of what is going on here. They are undertaking priestly duties just to one side but to animals rather than the everlasting omnipotent I am.** The elders claim that God has left the land. This is a form of **nature worship equating God with prosperity and wellness**. We see much of this today in churches around the world still. God makes it very clear he has a complete distaste for this. As Tim mentioned before they had made **their god into something tangible that was the product of human minds**, they are not overawed by the magnificence of the Holy One.

In the next scenario we find a group of women worshipping a **Babylonian god** which in the vision is on Judean soil. **Tammuz was a very popular fertility god**. Having many children was seen as a blessing from God and even today many worship their families I am not saying we disown our families but we must treat them as a gift from God to be nurtured and set free to be themselves **not to be the be all and end all of our lives**.

Finally, in the last scenario we find men turning their backs on the **temple structure and worshipping the rising sun instead**. Here they are at the very heart of the temple with their backs to the presence of God. Then God says: **“Have you seen this, O mortal? Is it not bad enough the house of Judah commits these abominations.”**

In 1971, 50 years ago, I found myself taking a local bus from Geneva train station up a mountain road to a village called **Huemoz**. I had finished my undergraduate degree and had been invited to go by my old schoolmaster. As a school leaving present he had given me this book **“The God who is there,” by Francis Schaeffer**. In a tiny wooden notice I saw the name of the **chalet: L’Abri**. The fortnight I stayed there sleeping on the floor changed my life. Schaeffer was a **Christian philosopher** who had set up L’Abri for people like me who were completely disillusioned with the church in all its forms. I was angry at the **church’s shallowness** and lack of intellectual enquiry in a world of protest, hippies and where the phrase of Prime Minister, Harold Macmillan from the **1960s “You have never had it so good,” had gone sour**. Schaeffer used to say his ministry was for **folk going from nowhere east to nowhere west**. I slept next to an ex heroin addict, had discussions with a ex Chicago prostitute and was humbled by a group of Polish students as they talked about their witness back in Communist Poland. I have most

of his books behind me here. **They are of their time.** In one entitled: **The Church before the watching world**” Schaeffer writes: **“No one is perfect. None of us is totally faithful to our divine bridegroom. But Scripture makes a clear distinction between the imperfection of all Christians and spiritual adultery which results when those who claim to be God’s people stop listening to what God has said and turn to other gods.”**

He goes on to say: **“Men like to tone down the reality and speak in polite language. But God does not.”** He then goes on to quote from **Ezekiel ch 6 v 9 from the Authorised Version. God is speaking: “I am broken with their whorish heart, which hath departed from me, and with their eyes, which go a whoring after their idols: and they shall lothe themselves for the evils which they have committed in all their abominations.”**

Ezekiel is strong stuff. And it becomes stronger as God reveals in the next chapters what he intends to do to those performing idolatry. They will be killed and God’s glory will leave the temple. Read it for yourselves.

We need to examine who we really **worship** or have we made our own false gods often in the name of religion. Bishop Richard Rohr calls it **junk religion** **“Junk religion is similar to junk food because it only satisfies enough to gratify the momentary desire but does not really feed the intellect or the heart. Junk religion is usually characterized by fear of the present and fear of the future.”**

Maybe as we experience our lockdown exile we should be brought back to reality as **Ezekiel really shows us the consequences of denying the full extent of God’s judgement to come.**