

Where God Lives, Now and in the Future
Sunday 28th February - Ezekiel 47:1-12
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Who could have imagined the events of the past year? On Sunday 23rd February 2020 (just over a year ago now), I was the preacher and, even at that point, none of us (I suspect) could have imagined the events that were about to transpire, how our lives would be changed, and the trauma we have all experienced to a greater or lesser extent. We certainly, I am sure, could not have imagined that we would still be having to live with restrictions on our lives almost a year later.

However, this week the Prime Minister provided a roadmap out of lockdown beginning on March 8th and progressing through stages until 'all legal limits on social contact [are] removed', hopefully, on 21st June. I am sure that we are all looking forward to being able to see family and friends without restrictions and to regain the freedoms we had taken for granted before this period. We are looking forward to 'restoration' after a period where we have all felt, to some degree, in exile from family, friends, church and normal lives.

As we have been thinking about in our series in Ezekiel, the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, traumatised not only by the loss of their homes and land but also by the destruction of the Temple. In Ezekiel 33:21, Ezekiel is told how the city of Jerusalem had fallen and the temple destroyed according to the judgement that Ezekiel had prophesied. As we have noted on several occasions, the opening chapters of the prophecy are relentless in prophesying judgement on Jerusalem and the people for their idolatry and persistent failure to live as God wanted. However, as Ray reiterated last week, once the worst case scenario has occurred, Ezekiel begins to prophesy and promise that restoration was going to come—that God's judgement on the people was not the final word. Restoration would come—hope would be rekindled as the exiled people could look forward to a change in their circumstances. As the readings for last week made clear, God promises to the people through Ezekiel:

...I will gather you from all the countries and bring you back into your own land...then you will live in the land...I will settle you in your own land'. (Ezek 36:24, 28; 37:14)

The trauma of exile will be ended—there will be a return to the land. We might be able to imagine just a small part of how that would have encouraged the people. How they would have looked forward to that with expectation—just as I am sure we are all looking forward to the possibilities from 21st June (assuming all goes as is hoped).

However, returning their land and that restoration was not the end of the story for the people. What had distinguished the people from the time they had left Egypt was the visible sign of God's presence among them, first in the Tabernacle and then in the Temple. When Solomon dedicated the Temple (2 Chronicles 7:1), the glory of the LORD filled the Temple signifying his presence with them. In a tragic scenario in Ezekiel 8-11, Ezekiel has a vision of the glory of God departing the Temple. That Temple was now destroyed—the question was what now for the presence of God with his people?

The answer to that and questions like this were answered by God in a series of visions that Ezekiel is given and that are recounted in the final chapters of the book from Chapter 40-48. The first series of visions, outlined in chapter 40-46, detail the rebuilding of the Temple providing measurements for the reconstruction of the Temple (ch 40-42) and in ch 43:1-4, Ezekiel has a vision of the glory of God returning to this rebuilt Temple and God tells Ezekiel that this Temple, 'is the place of my throne...This is where I will live among the Israelites... (43:7). Then Ezekiel is given instructions for the organisational structure of the Temple (chs 44-46). And while you might think, rather like Boris's cautious approach to easing lockdown, that I have taken a long time to get to it, we arrive at the vision that Ezekiel sees and recounts in 47:1-12.

In his vision, Ezekiel sees the Temple and witnesses a trickle of water coming out from the south side of the Temple and flowing towards the east. This trickle coming out from the Temple, flowing out from the presence of God—becomes ankle-deep, then knee-deep, then waist-deep and then finally a torrent that could not be crossed. In a distance of just over a mile this trickle of water miraculously becomes an uncrossable torrent. Nothing feeds into this trickle in terms of tributaries but it becomes a deep river. Only a miracle could make this happen. The river continues to the Dead Sea transforming that dead body of water from salty to fresh, so that 'where the river flows everything will live' (v9). Huge numbers of fish will live in this river and in the Dead Sea, although note that the swamps and salt-marshes will be left for salt—recognising the precious commodity that salt was within the ancient world. Not only will the river transform and bring life to dead waters but it will also bring life and transform the surrounding areas as all kinds of fruit trees will grow on the banks of the river—trees whose leaves and fruit will not fail—providing food to eat and leaves for healing.

This transformation of both the water and the land—the blessing that will come upon both—as dead water and land is brought to life—provides the people with a picture of just how much the Temple is the foundation for the land and water to be blessed. And why is it that foundation? Because it is the place where God dwells with his people. It is really important to grasp the fact that the Temple, for the people, was never simply about being the place of worship and sacrifice—it was a visible representation of the presence of God dwelling among his people. As God returns to dwell in his Temple and, so with his people, blessing pours out from that place and transforms everything. That transformation is miraculous just as a trickle can only become a deep river miraculously. To return to that central verse, 'where the river flows everything will live'. The people, the Temple and the Land will be restored as God comes to dwell with his people. Death will be transformed into life. What an incredible vision of restoration and transformation.

This idea of transforming water, or what we might call 'living water' is something that goes right back to the creation story. In Genesis 2:10-14, we are told about a river that flows from the Garden of Eden and in Psalm 46:4, the Psalmist says:

There is a river whose streams make glad the city of God, the holy place where the Most High dwells’.

In the final visions given to the Apostle John and that he recorded for us and that we read about in the Book of Revelation, there are echoes of Ezekiel’s vision as John says:

Then the angel showed me the river of the water of life, as clear as crystal, flowing from the throne of God and of the Lamb, down the middle of the great street of the city. On each side of the river stood the tree of life, bearing twelve crops of fruit, yielding its fruit every month. And the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. (Rev 22:1-2)

However, in John’s vision there are two important differences from that of Ezekiel’s vision. The first is that the water flows from the presence of God—yes—but not because there is a Temple—but because God has come to dwell with them—and so a visible representation is not required—God himself is the Temple and he is present with his people.

...I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Look! God’s dwelling-place is now among the people, and he will dwell with them...’ I did not see a temple in the city, because the Lord God Almighty and the Lamb are its temple (Rev 21:3, 22)

The second difference from Ezekiel’s vision relates to the leaves of healing. In Ezekiel’s vision, the healing brought by the leaves is confined to the people of Judah as they return to the land and to the rebuilt Temple. The leaves bring healing to a people traumatised by exile. However, in John’s vision, the leaves of the tree are for the healing of the nations. Ezekiel’s vision itself has been transformed from a focus on one particular people to a broad sweep of all the nations being healed by that transforming tree, fed with water from the river of life flowing from God’s throne.

I am sure you do not need me to tell you why there is a difference between the two, but in case there is any doubt in your minds, the difference is made by the coming of Jesus, by his death and resurrection. Through his death and resurrection, Jesus has made possible the transformation of dead people into people who are alive in Christ. As Ray also referred to last week, Paul described this transformation in his letter to the Ephesians:

But as for you, you were dead in your transgressions and sins in which you used to live...But because of his great love for us, God, who is rich in mercy, made us alive with Christ...for it is by grace you have been saved, through faith—and this is not from yourselves, it is the gift of God...(Eph 2:1-8)

The gift of God that miraculously transforms us from spiritually dead people to those who are alive in Christ can only be found in the person and work of Jesus Christ. Those who are transformed by that incredible gift of God in Jesus are from every nation and not just confined to a particular nation. John’s vision brings encouragement to each of us traumatised by this time of restrictions and traumatised by all that is so painful about daily

life as we understand that there a time is coming when all will be transformed as God dwells among his people, 'living water' flows from his throne and when God, '...will wipe every tear...there will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain' (Rev 21:4)

What an encouragement that is to each of us who knows that God has brought us out of death into life as we have placed our trust in the one who made that possible—Jesus, God's Son, who died on the cross (as we will remember on Good Friday) and who rose again from the dead (Easter Sunday). Life comes from death as Jesus demonstrated so powerfully when he rose from the dead. The question I ask each of us this Sunday: do you know that God has brought you from death into life? Many of you listening today will be able to say, 'yes' to that because you have trusted in what Jesus did on that first Easter, but if you are listening this morning and you are unsure whether you can say, 'yes', then can I encourage you to contact Tim to talk about this with him. Don't wait until Easter, don't wait until restrictions are lifted—you can be restored now. Jesus is waiting simply for you to say, 'yes' to him.

Water flows from the throne of God—in Ezekiel's vision from the Temple, in John's vision from the throne of God—and I am sure we are all happy with the idea that 'living water' flows from God, blessing the land and bringing life to dead places. In all honesty, if that was all that we could say about this passage, I think that would be enough, but there is more. It is not just that 'living water' flows from God, for those of us who have said 'yes' to Jesus, we are a source of 'living water'. On one occasion, in the Temple, during the Feast of Tabernacles, Jesus stood and, in a loud voice said:

Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.' By this he meant the Spirit, whom those who believed in him were later to receive... (John 7:37-39)

Trusting in Jesus, saying 'yes' to him brings the privilege that he comes to dwell in our lives through the Holy Spirit. This promised Holy Spirit, who was first given on the Day of Pentecost, gives 'spiritual life' to all who trust Jesus. As such, as Paul describes it, we become 'temples of the Holy Spirit' (I Cor 6:19)—we become places in whom the presence of God dwells. We become visible representations of the presence of God in the world. Not only that but because we are that representation, we become a source of living water flowing from us into the world—a world that needs healing, a world that needs transformation. We are to be people who bring blessing to all around us, through our lives and through our speech bringing the message of the good news of Jesus to those who are around us. Whether it is through the words we use or through the lives we lead, people need to find in us lives centred on God that is miraculously life-giving. 'Where the river flows everything will live' (v9) is not just something that physical water can bring—it is also a word for us to seek to bring life to those around us as we focus our lives on God and live for him. As one commentator said:

Our task, whether seeing the work of God progress like a mighty river or a dripping tap [the 'trickle'], is to seek to be faithful in centring our lives around Jesus Christ, our

temple. We are called to taste the goodness of life in all its fullness in him, even in our present exile, and to point others joyfully to him as the source of our life'. (Duguid, I.M., *Ezekiel*, NIV Application Commentary, Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999, 538)

As we live with restrictions for a few more months and continue to feel as though we are in exile, we need to challenge ourselves with the question as to whether our lives are centred on Jesus Christ and whether our lives are trickling (or even sending out as a torrent) that living water, refreshing and restoring those with whom we come in contact. Even in exile, we can point others to Jesus.

But perhaps, even more challenging is that as we move from exile into a restoration of life without restrictions, can we as people and as his church be that source of living water to the people around us, to the communities within which we live, whether here in Eaton Socon or elsewhere. As our communities come 'back to life' without restrictions, we need to be that source of 'living water' to those traumatised by the events of the last year. We can be that means of restoration and healing. The question is, will we allow ourselves to be? Will people see lives centred on Jesus? My prayer and that of the leadership here is that we will be.

Let's be a community that is one of whom it can be said, rivers of living water flow such that, 'where the river flows, everything will live'.

Amen

Let's pray.