

WELCOME 7th February 2021 – 5th Sunday after the Epiphany '21 B

Ezra 3:1-13 & 7:1-10

Welcome! It's great to be together again. Delighted you are here.

As has become our custom there are Group Study & Discussion resources in your hands. *So that for each of us worship is an all week long experience & as God leads you into the fullness of His word & his work in your lives & he will then lead you to someone this week who needs to hear the good news from you.* We are still doing those things we need to maintain a level of safety: Hand sanitizer. Masks. Sign in. No morning tea just yet. Offering. Communion.

As we move into this week...A child out of sight at the beach or shopping mall. A car in for repair. Your home being remodelled. Your job while you're on long-service leave. School, worship, work, travel during the last year. The hope of rain in a drought.

We know what it's like to **not** have something you need or want close at hand. We know what it feels like to desperately miss what's lost or out of your reach. We understand the longing for what isn't yours to obtain...or get back.

After 70 years of exile...God's people are sent home to re-establish their cities, their lives, their worship, their nation...Is this a new day of promise & hope...**OR** a reminder of all that's been lost?

As God's people worship, they discover it's **both**. As God gathers them for worship they are reminded of their destructive past, they receive the promise that they are destined for permanence, and are assured that they are designed for praise.

As different as life was in returning home...as unlike anything they remembered or had imagined, what had not changed was the simple fact that what matters most in life is that God desires we live in his presence to receive His life-transforming grace that alone gives, sustains & fills life to abundance now & forever.

Worship is **THE PLACE** where God's people experience his direct presence & receive his grace & goodness. Worship is **THE PLACE** from which God fills our lives & guides & protects us as His people. Today again, God's re-sets **our** worship so that **our** lives are turned to him for his purposes here in our world & we can invite others to join our song... *"God is so good! His faithful love for His people endures forever!"*

We'll explore & experience that together. Let's pray...then we'll get stuck into it.

PRAYER OF THE DAY:

Loving and Gracious God, we praise & thank you for your presence among us each day in your Word and by your Spirit. Thank you for choosing to dwell among us. We stand in awe of your calling us to be your faithful people.

Bless this time of worship that those who need comfort may be comforted, those who need challenge may be challenged, and that all of us may grow closer together as your children—as members of the body of Christ Jesus our Risen Lord, in whose name we pray. Amen.

Let's sing & then we'll hear God's Word...

FAITH CHAT:

1. Share a time when you "went without" something & then had it again. Lost/found? What was that like? How did you feel "without" & then "with"?
2. How can the past become a trap that keeps you from enjoying the present?
3. In your life & the life of your church community, where do you see 'God is good & his love endures' at this time?

(Prayer after sermon)

Father we make no pretence to your throne, so have your way in us. Re-set our lives to your will, our hearts to your way, & our path to your purpose. Re-establish your rule over us as your people. Reorient our hearts to your promised destiny & fill us with courage to obey you in all circumstances. Re-focus our eyes to your vision of lives transformed forever & set our spirits free to offer you the worship for which only you are worthy, so we live out your grace & love to all we know. Through Jesus Christ we pray... Amen.

5 Epiphany '21 B – RE-SET...WORSHIP

Woke up the other night w/ one of “those dreams.” Couldn’t figure out what was dream & what was real. Moment of ‘where am I?’ Reminded me of the time when we were travelling & the GPS sent us off into the back of beyond & we got caught in a thunderstorm & we had no choice but to just keep going. w/o familiar reference points, we lose our sense of direction become disoriented confused or frightened. When much of life gets like that...in situations of uncertainty & instability it’s easy to get anxious & overwhelmed

The people of God knew that...personally. After 70 years in exile, *In the first year of King Cyrus of Persia, the Lord fulfilled the prophecy he had given through Jeremiah. He stirred the heart of Cyrus... - Ez 1:1* & Cyrus sent the exiles back to Jerusalem & the land of Judah. Remember the timeline: Assyria overran & took captive the Nth Kingdom Israel. Babylon conquered Assyria & then the Sth Kingdom Judah, destroyed Jerusalem, sacked & demolished the glorious Temple Solomon had built. Burned looted pillaged exile. ≈70 years later Persia overthrew Babylon & claimed all their conquests for themselves. But unlike Assyria, Babylon & previous world superpowers, Persia sent the captives back to their own countries to farm their own lands & send \$\$ & material tribute back to Persia.

King Cyrus is the new global sheriff & he decrees: *“The Lord, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth. He has appointed me to build him a Temple at Jerusalem, which is in Judah. Any of you who are his people may go to Jerusalem in Judah to rebuild this Temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, who lives in Jerusalem. May your God be with you! Wherever this Jewish remnant is found, let their neighbours contribute toward their expenses by giving them silver & gold, supplies for the journey, & livestock, as well as a voluntary offering for the Temple of God in Jerusalem.”* It’s interesting to see a pagan king view himself as an instrument of Yahweh & re-fit the people to do what they longed to do throughout their captivity: restore their relationship w/ God by returning to the faith they had lived w/o for ≈70 years & had generally abandoned ¼ that. ‘Go home,’ he says loaded w/ blessings. Go home, loaded w/ blessings, & rebuild...& they did.

*In early autumn, when the Israelites had settled in their towns, all the people assembled in Jerusalem **with a unified purpose.** (as one/one man)* What that means is that for at least a moment...God’s people understood that their exile, defeat, destruction...death of thousands of family & friends...loss of freedom, homes, farms, cities & the Temple...It was their fault.

Their disobedience & idolatry had cost them everything of value & broken their fellowship w/ God. So their return, by the work of God in the heart of a pagan king, calls for the one thing they lacked over/over again...worship...devotion & obedience

to the Father. They gather fully aware that God is acting to put behind them their destructive past & their restoration begins through worship...New life begins in repentance...allowing the work of the Father to take hold in our lives drawing us into his presence to be grasped by his grace & love...to hear again the assurance:

Where is another God like you, who pardons the guilt of the remnant, overlooking the sins of his special people? You will not stay angry with your people forever, because you delight in showing unending love. – Micah 7:18

For them it began as they re-connected to the One who could forgive their past, stabilise & secure their present & move them toward the future w/ hope. That’s equally true for you & me.

Once you were dead because of your disobedience & sins. You used to live in sin, just like the rest of the world, obeying the devil—the commander of the powers in the unseen world...But God is so rich in mercy, & he loved us so much, that even though we were dead because of our sins, he gave us life when he raised Christ from the dead. (It is only by God’s grace that you have been saved!) – Eph 2:1-2, 4-5

A kind of spiritual homesickness resides in every human heart. We know we aren’t who we are supposed to be. We know we aren’t living into the fullness of life that our souls long to experience...but that self-inflicted wound that leads to death, the Father comes to heal. The healing begins here in the presence of the Father through the gift of the Son. Do you begin to see why I am so dogged in my understanding that online worship is such a pale shadow of the real thing among real people in real time? You do a great thing by reaching out to someone still sitting on their sofa & calling them back “as one.”

Think back to last week... David handing the reins of his rule to Solomon for the critical task of building the Temple. Everything then was just right. David was a much-loved powerful king. Solomon had every advantage & worked from a position of strength & great wealth. Now...as the people gather...knowing they bear the guilt for their sin against God & the wrath of destruction their nation has suffered...Everything about this situation is not what it should be. This isn’t simply finding the furniture in the wrong place...Waking up with a fright. There is no city. No Temple. Only rubble.

They have no king except Cyrus of Persia...a pagan marauder. Where they worship is a simple altar made from the leftovers of stones...There is no big grand opulent Temple...as yet only what’s left of Solomon’s foundation. When Solomon dedicated the Temple the glory of God filled it & the thick cloud/smoke of his presence drove everyone else outside. There is no glory now...just memories & hope. Israel is a subjugated province not a nation. They build in weakness. They arrive for worship shrouded in fear of their neighbours...refugees & war survivors like themselves.

There is nothing that would lead any of them to believe they are the proud nation: "God's chosen people." What a farce that must seem.

But everything they do is a signal they remember they as God's people are destined for permanence. Worship is first...but the rebuilding is not far behind & integral to their renewal is God's Word. Every step they follow is in accord w/ what they have been commanded by God at some point in their history. 7X here they act in obedience to God's Word. What they had ignored as a people ^{b/4}, now they cling to w/ all their might. That which from the beginning promised to sustain defend guide & guard them...they now see as that which leads to life in its fullest. Later, when the rebuilding bogs down because of their enemies & opponents, Ezra comes to help re-ignite their faith/fervour. He succeeds...why? how? GP verse of the week: Ez 7:10 – "...the gracious hand of his God was on (Ezra). This was because Ezra had determined to study & obey the Law of the Lord & to teach those decrees & regulations to the people of Israel."

Ezra knows...There is no foundation that can be built to last if it is not built on the bedrock of God's Word...his covenant promises & his clear desires for his people. When you don't know what else to do...when it's time to start over...**BACK TO BASICS**. Ezra saw they had been stopped stifled & stymied & so he took them back to sq # 1. What has God said **for** us? What has God said **to** us? What are **we** going to **do** about it? We are no different...*Timothy, my dear son, be strong through the grace God gives you in Christ Jesus. You have heard me teach things that have been confirmed by many reliable witnesses. Now teach these truths to other trustworthy people who will be able to pass them on to others.* - 2 Tim 2:1-2 Destined for permanence...intended to create a lasting trail of faithful people generation to generation to generation...

The promises of God do not come with an expiration date. What has always been true is always true. My Dad used to say 'it is always the right time to do the right thing.' If you cannot obey God in some grand gesture, then obey him in the small things of your life. Do what you know needs to be done, & do it asking God to use that small thing for His glory & for the opportunity for someone else to be welcomed into His kingdom. *Do not despise these small beginnings, for the Lord rejoices to see the work begin, to see the plumb line in Zerubbabel's hand.* – Zec 4:10

*When the builders completed the foundation of the Lord's Temple, the priests put on their robes & took their places to blow their trumpets. Then the Levites, descendants of Asaph, clashed their cymbals to **praise** the Lord, just as King David had prescribed. With **praise** & thanks, they sang this song to the Lord: "He is so good! His faithful love for Israel endures forever!" Then all the people gave a great shout, **praising** the Lord because the foundation of the Lord's Temple had been laid. Everything God has done leads to this moment: a*

"great shout" of praise. God has begun to forgive their destructive past, he has reminded them they are destined for permanence & now they find their lives' true purpose: they are designed for praise.

As are you...we...Christ's church: *Furthermore, because we are united with Christ, we have received an inheritance from God, for he chose us in advance, & he makes everything work out according to his plan. God's purpose was that we Jews who were the first to trust in Christ would bring **praise & glory** to God. Now you Gentiles have also heard the truth, the Good News that God saves you; & when you believed in Christ, he identified you as his own by giving you the Holy Spirit, whom he promised long ago. The Spirit is God's guarantee that he will give us the inheritance he promised & that he has purchased us to be his own people. He did this so we would **praise & glorify** him.* – Eph 1:12-14

I love this great shout arising - this moment of exaltation breaking out over the foundation. Years would pass before the temple was finished. This was only the first step, but they paused anyway to raise a great shout. This is so cool! They worship ^{b/4} the debris is cleared. They praise ^{b/4} the bldg. is finished. I love that. Sometimes you have to praise God for what you don't have yet...but are trusting he will provide. Sometimes ^{b/4} the healing happens, ^{b/4} conflict is over ^{b/4} the problem is solved ^{b/4} the bills are paid ^{b/4} the battle is won you have to praise God for what he's going to do no matter the outcome in this moment...

*After consulting the people, king Jehosaphat appointed singers to walk ahead of the army, singing to the Lord & praising him for his holy splendour. This is what they sang: "**Give thanks to the Lord; his faithful love endures forever!**" At the very moment they began to sing & give praise, the Lord caused the armies of Ammon, Moab, & Mount Seir to start fighting among themselves...they began attacking each other.* - 2 Chr 20:21-23 *So when the army of Judah arrived at the lookout point in the wilderness, all they saw were dead bodies lying on the ground as far as they could see. Not a single one of the enemy had escaped. What are you waiting for...^{b/4} you shout? What stops you from praising God for what you are trusting him to provide but you don't have yet?*

Yep...some of the folks who remembered the grandeur of Solomon's Temple wept instead of shouted. It's true: The future will not be the past. Tomorrow may bear no resemblance to yesterday. But if God has forgiven our destructive past & destined us for permanence w/ him & designed us for praise in every moment...then in past, present & future whatever they were are or will be: "God is so good! His faithful love for His people endures forever!" & we can invite others to join our song...

Let's pray with that in mind...