

Trinity Baptist Church – Preacher: Ron Jones
Trinity, 8 August 2021: Zechariah 7

Reading: Zechariah 7: 1 - 10

What, you may ask, is the relevance of this passage from Zechariah to us today? Well: Zechariah was a prophet at a time of reconstruction: rebuilding the Temple at Jerusalem. It's an exciting story. When the people of Judah were in exile in Babylon, with Jerusalem laid waste behind them, Cyrus, ruler of the mighty Persian empire, suddenly declared that God had appointed him to rebuild the Temple, and allowed anyone who wished, from among the Jewish exiles in Babylon, to go back to Jerusalem under the King's protection and get on with the job. The book of Ezra describes how, when the exiles first arrived back home, they were full of enthusiasm for rebuilding the temple and getting the worship and sacrifices going again. But then there was a lot of local opposition and sneering from the local inhabitants, and the work came to a standstill for nearly 20 years.

But then two prophets came on the scene: Haggai and Zechariah - and reminded the people why they were there. Haggai's message is simple and forceful: "You say it's not the right time to build the house of the Lord - so what is it: the right time for you to live in your luxury houses while MY HOUSE LIES IN RUINS?" And the leaders got the message, and they and the prophets got on with the task.

Now compare our situation today at the tentative open end of the Covid restrictions. It's not an exact fit - but we also had some building going on a couple of years ago, didn't we? We haven't been in exile, things haven't exactly come to a halt during lockdown, and certainly the hiatus has not been driven by local opposition making us think we'd rather stay at home. But think of the discussions we've had: How should we now manage services in the chapel? Shall we go on preaching to a live congregation, "as we have done for so many years"? Shall we continue to stream the services? What shall we do about the Prayer Meetings? And the word of the Lord that he sent through Zechariah becomes very interesting in that light.

Zechariah is a fascinating book, by the way. It divides into two parts, with the division falling between Chapters 8 and 9 - and the first 8 chapters are a bit easier than the rest of the book. Not that the first 8 chapters are at all obvious - but they are very brightly coloured, and various parts stand out. I want to look with you at some of them - but firstly: we need to be careful about assuming that all of scripture is about us. It's all for us to learn from, sure: but it needs to be applied carefully. For example, it's very easy to take to ourselves that lovely passage in Jeremiah 29: "I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord: plans to prosper you and not to harm you...". But the same God also said of his people, through Jeremiah: "Although they fast, I will not listen to their cry; although they offer burnt offerings and grain offerings, I will not accept them. Instead, I will destroy them with the sword, famine and plague". (That was Jeremiah 14: 11 - 12.) The difference, obviously, is the context: God is not contradicting himself. But it ought to show us not just to grab the good bits without finding out how the whole picture fits together. So:- Jerusalem, and the Temple, can be a useful picture of our church in some ways, but the parallel needs to be drawn with care.

In our chapter the building work is progressing - and a deputation arrives at the building site from the people of Bethel. They want to know whether, with the Jerusalem project going ahead, and the prospect of regular temple worship being restored, they should start up again with the fasting and solemn observance that used always to take place in the fifth month. It's slightly odd when you look at the date when this question reached Jerusalem - or at least, when God sent the answer. I would think, in view of what the answer was, that the reply came fairly quickly after the question was asked - which means, if you substitute our months, that it's 4th. September, and the Bethelites are worrying about what to do next May!

God's reply is something of a shot across the bows. "Why were you actually doing all these things? In your minds, was it really relevant to me?" And he reminds them of the long, sorry history of repeated warnings from the Lord through previous prophets, all of which the people had chosen to ignore. I want to pause here and think with you about how we receive hard words from God.

Trinity is a lively and well-attended church. Our family joined in 1987, and for all that time we have been served with excellent Bible teaching. We have a well-resourced children's and young people's ministry; and the music isn't bad, either! But everything in the Christian life comes with associated dangers - and in our good situation it is so easy to ignore the difficult words from God. Do you remember the "My Naughty Little Sister" books? Having had four girls, the Jones family is well-acquainted with the series. In case you aren't familiar with them, they are written as if by an older sister, whose little sibling is obviously very spirited and also going through the tantrums stage - possibly the "Terrible Twos". Something like: *"Our mummy said we had to go the shops. So I put my coat and shoes on, and I tried to help my little sister with hers. **But do you know what my naughty little sister did?**"* - followed by details of the ensuing pandemonium, and often rounded off with *"I'm glad **you're** not like that"*. Do we think we don't deserve hard words from God?

Terry once quoted something I have never forgotten: I can't quote exactly, but the gist was that "the trouble with evangelicals is that when they hear something from the word of God they think they've done it". This agrees with a book on preaching that I'm trying to read by an American theologian named Walter Brueggemann. It's the sort of book that requires plenty of time, a clear head and a good supply of Ibuprofen - do you know what I mean? I haven't got very far into it yet, but his thesis is that today's preachers need to be as arresting as the old prophets. This, he says, writing primarily to the church in USA, is because Christian believers have got into a frame of mind where they think that their regular spiritual life-pattern is exactly what the New Testament meant. This is another way of putting what Terry said - and if this is true it means real danger.

The warnings in Zechariah are rather specifically related to Israel's or Judah's circumstances, but there are plenty in the New Testament addressed directly to the churches and their people. It's easy to read 1 Corinthians, in the parts that deal with specific problems in that church, and deflect them on the grounds that this kind of behaviour couldn't possibly occur or be tolerated here. As if God were adding a P.S. to his word: **"I'm glad you're not like that"**! Of course God is delighted if "we're not like that" - but we do need to avoid glossing over these parts of the Bible. I know of a church where someone with a prophetic ministry had confided in the minister that a specified number of people in the church were committing adultery, and the minister saw fit to share this with the congregation. There was an almighty row, on the grounds that this kind of prophecy shouldn't be shared in public, possibly tinged with the view that God didn't speak directly to his people these days - I don't know. But I do know that a week or so later the minister referred to the criticism and quietly said that his only response was that since the sharing of that prophecy that exact number of people had come forward to confess adultery.

Back in Zechariah 7: there's a poignant phrase in verse 7, pointing out that the earlier warnings from the Lord were issued "when the Negev (or "desert") and the western foothills were settled". In many places in England there are sites of derelict and abandoned villages. One of the most poignant is Imber, on Salisbury Plain in Wiltshire. Imber goes back to Roman times - but in 1943 it was requisitioned by the military for use as an army training range, and the inhabitants were made to clear out. There was compensation, the farmland was bought at a good price, and there was little resistance. The people were told they could come back after 6 months - but this has never happened, and various public enquiries have consistently found in favour of the military. You can travel there by bus on certain days of the year, and the church is opened once a year for a service - which is still attended by the grandson of Imber's last-ever blacksmith.

So God says to the men of Bethel: look at the desert and the foothills: see those ruins? That bleakness? People used to be able to live in these places! They supported life in the days when you all followed me. Would it be fair to apply this by saying that, from experience, when I am tending to drift rather than putting my heart and soul into following the Lord, then church itself seems to have become a bit arid? Do we lose the habit of listening carefully to sermons?

I remember hearing, not long after we first arrived at Trinity and our first regular experience of “charismatic worship”, someone describing a wonderful service where the sung worship went on so long that there was barely time for the preaching! OK, we know what she meant - but watch out for the subtext that says “all sermons are boring”.

Brothers and sisters, you know me, we are all in this together, and the warnings in Scripture are there because we need to be familiar with them, need to apply them to ourselves. We need to watch out in case, living as we do in a large and relatively thriving church, we find ourselves tending to hide behind Trinity’s performance, or thinking (even if only in a whisper) that we’ve got it made. There’s a story about Charles Spurgeon listening in college to one of his students preaching on the Whole Armour of God from Ephesians 6, as part of his training. The student listed the belt, the breastplate, the sandals and so on, acting-out putting these items on as he went through the list. I don’t know whether he used some sort of pretend armour or whether he was just miming the actions. But finally he brandished the Sword of the Spirit, and challenged loudly: “And now, where is the Devil?” Spurgeon’s comment was, “Young man, he’s inside that armour!” Let me remind you all:- **the Holy Spirit is no fool.**

One other matter we should note is that it can be a distasteful and dangerous mission to bring God’s word to his people. Jeremiah complained bitterly to the Lord about the words he was given. There’s no sign in Zechariah’s book that he had any special problem with what he was given to say - but in Matthew 23, where Jesus is pronouncing his judgement upon the scribes and Pharisees, and just before his famous cry of “O, Jerusalem, Jerusalem!”, he confronts them with “the blood of Zechariah son of Berekiah, whom you murdered between the temple and the altar”.

Let’s get back to our Zechariah passage. The message there is that restoring the worship services has to be carefully and deliberately focused on God if it is to be God-honouring. Our chapter 7 ends with a description of God pointing out exactly what had happened to the land - in effect, describing the chaos and ruins they had discovered when arriving back there from Babylon; but the first 8 chapters as a whole are full of cameos of hope and restoration, often very colourfully described. I want to pick out a few of these.

In Zechariah’s visions, he is there in the vision, and an angel is there trying to explain things to him. In Chapter 1 he is shown what he describes as “four horns”. A horn is a symbol of power, usually power to overcome or dominate something or somebody, and the angel explains that these are the political powers which have been oppressing God’s people. Then into the picture come “four craftsmen”, and Zechariah asks the angel why they are there. The answer is that the craftsmen have come to terrify the horns and throw them down. Just think about it: what would you suggest as an antidote to the brutal power of Babylon, or the Assyrians? Have you been to the British Museum and seen the displays there from Assyria? What do you reckon, against that: nuclear fission? No: God has sent four back-room boys, each in a faded overall and with a pencil behind his ear! And they are going to terrify the horns! Just look at the mighty power of God. We think of power, especially almighty power, in terms of unbearable noise - and it can be like that: “his voice was as the sound of many waters”. But he doesn’t need to turn up the volume: he can “roar with power”, as one of the songs puts it, if he wants to - but he doesn’t need to: he has an almighty whisper. And the Resurrection garden is the quietest place on earth! Just be a craftsman and walk with God.

Then there's a man with a measuring line; think of one of those retractable steel tapes. Zechariah asks this man what he's doing, and he says he's going to measure Jerusalem, to find out how long and wide it is. And another angel interrupts the first angel, and tells him to hurry and tell the measuring-line man there's no point - because when God's blessing falls upon Jerusalem it will be so long and wide that nobody can measure it. In fact there won't be any walls to measure, because so many people and animals live there, all drawn in by God's overflowing blessing, and God himself will be the wall, all round them.

I wouldn't want to try to fit all this directly into our church, or preach it as though this is what the Lord has said he is about to do with us: but doesn't it make you hungry?

Another vision has a touch of humour about it, in that the angel can't understand why Zechariah doesn't immediately get the hang of it. Let me read it from Chapter 4:- (read verses 1 - 6). Zerubbabel is described by Haggai as the Governor of Judah, and with him was Joshua, the High Priest of the day. Zechariah also has a message for Joshua, one of huge encouragement; we haven't time to look at it today. But look at what Zerubbabel's message is: **NOT BY MIGHT, NOT BY POWER, BUT BY MY SPIRIT, SAYS THE LORD ALMIGHTY.** And it's very suggestive that this of all the visions is the one Zechariah has difficulty in understanding. It's a great, resounding phrase, isn't it? "**Not by might, not by power...**" - and it's obviously the right thing to believe; but isn't it difficult to live by it? We don't naturally understand the vision either! We don't like the sound of it: probably much disciplined prayer, and a good deal of waiting with no apparent result, and we don't take to it easily. Look: no church is perfect; Trinity has you and me in it for a start. How could it be improved? "Not by might, not by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord Almighty." Which means, of course, hard, honest prayer about it in the first instance. When you come to think of it, that's a much safer course than trying to organise or strategise. For one thing, it's possible we may have got it wrong - and if that's the case, if we bring it honestly and completely into God's presence he can sort that out and stop us doing damage .

One more vision: in Chapter 8, God tells Zechariah in effect that he can't wait to get back to live in Jerusalem. Verses 2 - 6: "This is what the Lord Almighty says: I am very jealous for Zion; I am burning with jealousy for her. . . I will return to Zion and dwell in Jerusalem. Then Jerusalem will be called the City of Truth, and the mountain of the Lord will be called the Holy Mountain. . Once again men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with cane in hand because of his age. The city streets will be filled with boys and girls playing there." And it goes on to speak directly in Verse 11 to Zechariah's listeners: "YOU who NOW hear THESE words spoken by the prophets... let YOUR hands be strong so that the temple may be built." And promises of blessing, good harvests, safety and joy - coupled with a reminder to "speak the truth to each other. . do not plot evil against your neighbour: I hate all this, declares the Lord".

So in our time of reconstruction, God's word comes to YOU who NOW hear THESE WORDS that were spoken by the prophets. Let's reconstruct so as to take into Trinity that promised reputation that was promised to Jerusalem: "a Church of Truth, a Holy Church". How? "NOT by might, NOT by power, but by my Spirit, says the Lord Almighty."