

Returning (Zechariah 8:3-8)

In our reading we hear God's words through the prophet Zechariah, words spoken to God's people when they were living in exile.

This passage was among the readings at Saturday morning prayer last week and I thought at the time how exciting and relevant it was as we had agreed to talk about returning in the evening services.

The passage starts with God saying that He will return to Jerusalem, then promises that the people will return and ends with God promising that they will be his people and that He will be faithful and righteous to them.

As we wait for tomorrow's announcement about what activities we can return to and what activities will remain being done in the careful way that we are doing them at the moment let's ponder God's view on returning.

Firstly returning is something that God does; He is going back to the places that had traditionally been holy and set apart from Him. For people in exile, or living under any form of restriction how reassuring to know that God is going ahead as things return. It's like coming back from holiday or a hospital stay knowing that a friend or neighbour has been in and left essential groceries, and opened the windows to let fresh air in – we are not doing any returning on our own.

Coming back to church at Easter this year when restrictions lifted, I was struck again by our beautiful east window, with the disciples on their knees praying but looking up to see Jesus going ahead of them.

Secondly from our reading, how lovely that the men and women of ripe old age will sit in the streets that are filled with boys and girls playing. The old people would themselves have been children when the exile to Babylon began, but they would return to their homes and watch another generation of children play. Although we know from other passages that Jerusalem had been badly damaged by invading armies this sounds like a picture of a city at peace where the children feel safe to play and the old people can sit and watch them.

This week I returned to London for the first time in over a year, to meet former colleagues who I first worked with over 20 years ago – I was nervous about travelling on public transport, especially the tube – but just like the old people in the passage, all was well the journey went smoothly and we were able to sit in peace. Sadly we shared that peace at a crematorium saying a last farewell to David who had been part of a close knit team, but there was joy as well as sadness as we recalled good times spent with him and took simple pleasure in being with one another once again. I was reminded as I read this passage that returning can be worrying, but if we trust that God has gone before us and journeys with us then the worry lessens and the chance of joy increases.

Finally, in our reading God says that He will bring His people back to Jerusalem and they will be His people and He will be faithful and righteous to them. Not as we might expect that He wants the people to be faithful to Him, but that He will be faithful to them. “I will bring them back to live in Jerusalem; they will be my people, and I will be faithful and righteous to them as their God”

As we turn to prayer, let's reflect on the words of Brian Doerksen's lovely song:

Faithful one, so unchanging
Ageless one, you're my rock of peace
Lord of all I depend on you
I call out to you, again and again
I call out to you, again and again

You are my rock in times of trouble
You lift me up when I fall down
All through the storm
Your love is, the anchor
My hope is in You alone