

## Sermon – 12/10/2008 pm

### A Remnant Returns

Study Text: Ezra 2

There is great interest in genealogies these days. We had people come to India searching the records in our church. They were eager to learn about their forbears who had lived and died in India. In Scotland businesses have been established to assist people in genealogical searches. People are keen to learn about their ancestors, where they came from and what they did. It is interesting that many of the records are found in churches, churches which today's generation rarely attend. Yet there are some returning to the faith of their fathers and we pray that there will be many more.

The book of Genesis is structured around genealogies – the genealogy of Adam, of Noah, and of Abraham and his sons. God called Abraham and promised to give him many descendants and a land where they could live and worship him. It was through Isaac and then Jacob/Israel that God would establish his chosen people – a holy nation belonging to God. Through this family all the families of the earth would be blessed.

God brought the twelve tribes of Israel into the land of Canaan, giving each tribe and each family an inheritance of land. They lived in this land as God's people but were not faithful to the covenant he made with them. He sent them into exile in Babylon under the terms of that covenant – his punishment for disobedience. But even while sending them to live in a foreign land God promised through his prophets that he would bring them back. He would preserve a remnant unto himself.

### Abraham's Descendants

We come to a passage that is heavy going just to read, let alone to grasp its meaning and relevance. But all Scripture is inspired by God and is useful to us. Genealogies have an important place in the Old Testament – even the New Testament begins with a lengthy genealogy. It is the genealogy of Jesus Christ the son of David, the son of Abraham. God chose to reveal himself to Abraham and to send his only begotten Son into this world through the tribe of Judah and the line of David.

The world thought Jerusalem was finished, and so did many of God's people. The city was but a mound of rubble. Rebuilding the city was unthinkable. But God's promise to Abraham remained. The blessing of this nation had not yet come to all the world. The word of the prophets was yet to be fulfilled. This chapter tells of the remnant, a contingent of some 50,000 people, coming back to Judah and Jerusalem.

The composition of this remnant is detailed in this chapter as well as in a parallel passage in Nehemiah 7. Not only the numbers but the genealogies are given. Many were returning to their allotted land. Only Israelites could possess land in Israel. Moreover only true Israelites could worship in the temple. They were the holy people of God. They were the people whom God had given the Law of Moses, the people whom he had commanded to worship him. There was provision for converts who underwent circumcision to join in worship, but they did not get inheritance in the land (Exodus 12:48).

The first section listed is the leaders. Zerubbabel was the chief. He was a descendant of David and therefore a royal figure. He is listed in the genealogy of Jesus (Matthew 1:12, 13). His relationship to Sheshbazzar (1:11) is uncertain but it does seem that this was the first party of exiles to return. Next to Zerubbabel was Jeshua (Joshua in Hebrew and Jesus in Greek), the son of the Jehozadak, the High Priest who was taken into exile (Haggai 1:1). Nehemiah lists twelve leaders. For some reason Nahamani is missing from this list in Ezra. The twelve leaders may be a reflection of the twelve tribal leaders who led Israel out of Egypt in the first Exodus.

The second section lists lay Israelites. These men are identified by family/clan name or by place of residence – a total of 21,144. Why some are identified by family and others by place of residence is not clear but the point is that all these men had historical evidence of their belonging to the land and to the people of God.

After the lay people come the priests and Levites. There were just four families of priests but their numbers are significant. They made up ten percent of the whole group. The priests were essential to the re-establishment of sacrificial worship. Various guilds like singers – the sons of Asaph – and gatekeepers were also included.

The Nethinim or temple servants were a group appointed by David to assist the Levites. Many of them have foreign names suggesting they were drafted from prisoners of war. To this group are added the son's of Solomon's servants giving a total of 392 (2:58).

Despite the passing of half a century in a foreign land and a lot of intermarriage this list shows that many could still trace their heritage back to the families and land of their fathers. This continuity was important when it came to worshipping the Lord in the land he had given them as their inheritance. They returned to re-establish pure worship of the Lord, worship which under the Old Covenant was linked to the temple and associated sacrifices.

### **The Unconfirmed**

The list goes on to include others who *could not identify their father's house or their genealogy, whether they were of Israel* (2:59). The places where they came up from are places around Babylon. They had no evidence of coming from a place or a family in Israel.

Whilst they came up with the party, the priests who could not confirm their identity with a genealogy were not permitted to practice. They were regarded as unclean. According to the Law of Moses the priesthood was inherited, so without evidence of this inheritance they were not allowed to practice as priests. The leaders of this returning remnant were determined to restore worship according to the Word of God.

Whilst purity of worship was paramount, justice was also maintained. Their claims to the priesthood would be examined. God had given to the High Priest the Urim and the Thummim, two objects which he could use to determine God's answer to prayer. This determination would take some time, maybe because these Urim and Thummim could not be located, or a priest could not be found.

The returning remnant received many gifts and so were endowed with servants, animals and money when they returned, as the closing verses of this chapter indicate. They in turn *offered*

*freely for the house of God to erect it in its place (2:68)*. Still they tended to go off into their own towns and settle down to their own business. At times they had to be exhorted to go up and continue the work of rebuilding the temple and the walls of Jerusalem. In fact the heavy hand of the Lord came upon them in the form of drought and poor harvests (Haggai 1).

## **Children of God**

Today we may not appreciate what appears to be racial discrimination among this remnant. Why did they not welcome anyone and everyone who wanted to join them? There was a danger they would be overwhelmed by people who did not know their God or the manner of worshipping God. There was the danger of compromise and diluting the demands of the Law that God gave through Moses. At this time in redemptive history God was still dealing exclusively with the Jews as his special people. All this would change under the New Covenant in Jesus Christ.

It was John the Baptist who first warned the Jews about claiming Abraham as their father. He told them *God is able to raise up children to Abraham from these stones (Matthew 3:9)*. Jesus told those claiming Abraham as their father that they were in fact of their father the devil (John 8). Paul made it clear that in the church of Jesus Christ there is *neither Jew nor Greek, male nor female, slave nor free for you are all one in Christ Jesus (Galatians 3:28)*. He also said they are *not all Israel who are of Israel (Romans 9:6)*. In fact all who are of the same faith of Abraham are the children of Abraham.

It should not have to be said in the church today that discrimination on the basis of race or family background has no place. There is only one class of people in the church of Jesus Christ and that is those who believe in Jesus Christ. Yet there are those who cling to their pedigree and their purity. As one writer says ‘pedigree and purity can easily turn to pride and superiority’. In some Indian churches converts cling to their old Hindu caste titles. Some of our churches are dominated by a particular family or people claiming special privileges because of their pedigree.

The principal of separation of the people of God from the people of the world continues in the New Testament. It is just that the people of God today are identified as those who believe in Jesus Christ, not those who are from a Christian family. Whilst everyone is welcome to hear the word of God, only those who have repented of their sin and believe they have forgiveness in the blood of Jesus Christ are to partake of the sacraments. These are not to be taken in ‘an unworthy manner’ meaning they are not for those who do not understand their meaning – and people cannot understand their meaning if they do not believe in Jesus Christ.

*Rev. Dr. Dennis K. Muldoon*