

## Sermon – 05/10/2008 pm

### God Stirs His People

Study Text: Ezra 1:5-11

Missionaries often speak of countries being open or closed. Some countries prohibit any form of Christian ministry, especially preaching the gospel. Christian workers were not allowed to enter Nepal for many years. They set up hospitals on the border in India so the people could come over for healing and for hearing the gospel. Then in 1950s the policy changed. The king opened the door for Christian workers to enter. God changed the heart of the king. At the same time he stirred up his own people to move in and bring the gospel to the four corners of this mountainous kingdom.

#### People Stirred

*The Lord stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia (1:1).* He moved this pagan king to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem. Cyrus opened the door for the exiled Jews to return to their homes, homes from which they had been removed some 50 years before. He encouraged them to return and rebuild the house of the Lord God of Israel (1:3). But would God's people return? Would they get up and move from their comfortable life in the city of Babylon? Would they go to a place of ruins, a place where life would be tough and they would have to work hard?

God is powerful to stir up the heart of kings. He is also powerful to stir up the heart of his own people. This is what we see in the passage before us. God moved in the hearts of people from the tribes of Judah, Benjamin and Levi *to go up and build the house of the Lord which is in Jerusalem (1:5).*

We might have thought God's people would be eager to rebuild the temple so that they could worship the Lord once again. This is what returning to Jerusalem was all about. It was not about sentimentality, it was about worship. It was not about building a magnificent structure, but about worship. The temple was central to worship according to the Law of Moses.

In exile they could not offer the prescribed sacrifices for sin. Daniel prayed three times a day as required with his face towards Jerusalem. Others worshipped the Lord as best they could in exile. But there were those who compromised with the local inhabitants with regard to worship. They were not so concerned about going back to Jerusalem and rebuilding the temple. God had to stir them up. Still there were those who never went back.

This would not be the last time God had to stir up his people. After they had returned they experienced some setbacks. The locals discouraged them and lobbied against the rebuilding. The work stopped for over ten years and would have remained that way if God had not stirred up his people once again. He spoke to the people through his prophets Haggai and Zechariah. *Is it time for you to live in panelled houses and this temple to be in ruins (Haggai 1:4).*

What about the house of God and worship today? Are you eager to go up to the house of God to worship or do you need to be stirred up? Are we more concerned about our own house than the house of the Lord? Do we, in the words of the apostle Paul, look out for our own interests and neglect the things which are of Christ (Philippians 2:21). Some people come to church as if for free entertainment – although churches in the business of entertainment are often keen on getting your money. The picture of the church as the body of Christ has been exchanged for that of a spectator sport.

May the Lord stir up his people. May he stir us up to be concerned for his house, not just the building but the body. May he move our spirit to attend to worship as our highest priority. As Paul again told the Philippian church *for it is God who works in you both to will and to do for his good pleasure* (Philippians 2:13).

## Gifts

As the remnant set out for Jerusalem all *their neighbours encouraged them with gifts of gold and silver, with goods and livestock, and with precious things* (1:6). Their fellow Jews – *men of this place* (1:4) – assisted them on their journey but it seems their Gentile neighbours were also generous towards them. This reminds us of the Exodus from Egypt when the Egyptians gave the Jews whatever they asked for – silver and gold and clothing – as they left the country of bondage. The Lord had given his people favour in the sight of the Egyptians (Exodus 12:36).

How wonderfully God works all things together for good for those who love him and obey him. In God's omnipotence he could have had all these things to suddenly appear – by a snap of his fingers as it were. But God chose to move people to give generously. Working in this way the giver and the receiver are blessed and God is glorified (II Corinthians 9:3). Not only are the needs of people supplied but thanksgiving overflows towards God through this personal sharing of resources. Even the king opened his treasury and gave liberally but it is the giving of brothers and neighbours which is highlighted here.

In our pride we do not like to accept gifts. In our selfishness we do not like to give anything. In giving freely and receiving graciously we say no to these two sins, selfishness and pride. Moreover, according to the words of Jesus, in giving to others we are giving to the Lord – *as much as you did it to the least of these my brethren you did it to me* (Matthew 25:40). Jesus did not treat this matter lightly, the matter of helping the needy and the poor.

## Temple Articles

A colleague of mine was a Hindu but still he used to read the Bible from time to time. He liked to talk about the Bible and even came to church once or twice. But he would not accept that Jesus was only way to God. Like many in our city he thought that there are many ways to heaven and that all religions are same. Such thinking is praised for being loving and tolerant, even if false. We believe in freedom of religion but still hold that Jesus alone is the truth.

When King Cyrus came to power in Babylon, the centre of world power at that time, he changed official policy on religion. The Babylonian kings demanded that all subjects worship the gods of Babylon. Cyrus promoted the welfare of all religions. Under this policy he encouraged the Jews to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem and worship the God of Israel.

A further outcome of this policy was that of returning non-Babylon gods to their former cities. Israel of course had no carved images and no idols but there were things that Nebuchadnezzar had taken from the temple in Jerusalem and put in the temples of Babylon (1:7, Daniel 1:2). These things included plates, bowls, knives and other vessels – a total of 5400 articles – used in the worship of Yahweh.

A list of these articles is included in this book, the first of many lists that we will come across. In some versions this inventory is set out in table form. You may not be greatly interested in such detail but it is important for two reasons.

Firstly it points to the sources and authority of this book. Ancient kings liked to keep records, probably to boast in their conquests. Remember how Belshazzar took these holy vessels to drink from during his drunken party (Daniel 5). Therefore in the providence of God these articles were not lost but could be traced even after fifty years. The inventory was used by the treasurer to identify and count the vessels that were handed over. The writer of this book could consult this record.

Secondly, and more importantly, these articles represented a continuity of worship. The temple was gone but the articles had been preserved. They would continue to worship the God of their fathers. They would continue to worship God in the same manner as their fathers. The temple would be rebuilt according to the pattern the Lord gave Moses on the mountain. These articles would once again be used in worship of Yahweh.

The articles were counted out to Sheshbazzar, the prince/ruler of Judah (1:8). There is some uncertainty as to the identity of this man because in the next chapter Zerubbabel appears as the leader of the returning party of exiles. But the name of Sheshbazzar comes up again in the official record (5:14). Some think they are the same person but this is unlikely. We cannot be certain but it may be that Sheshbazzar was the official leader, an older man perhaps, and Zerubbabel the unofficial leader of the party.

According to the word of the Lord by the mouth of Jeremiah the first party of exiles *was brought up from Babylon to Jerusalem* (1:11). Note the words 'brought up'. They were brought up by the outstretched arm of the Lord just as their fathers had been brought up from Egypt in the first exodus. The Lord had preserved as remnant for himself just as he said. Families from the two tribes that made up the southern kingdom, Judah and Benjamin, were brought up along with priests and Levites.

Priests and Levites were integral to true Mosaic worship. The tribe of Judah was also very important. Why? From this tribe would come the 'Lion of the tribe of Judah', our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ! Through him God would fulfil his promise to Abraham; in you all the families of the earth will be blessed.

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