

Sermon – 22/03/2009 am

Response to Ezra Reading the Law

Study Text: Nehemiah 8:9-12

Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted (Matthew 5:4). When we think of mourning we think of those who have lost loved ones; of mourning in the face of death. As Jesus spoke these words on the mountain side he was not just speaking to those mourning in the face death but to those mourning in the face of sin. Blessed are those who realize the seriousness of sin, and mourn over their sin and the sin of others (Ezekiel 9:4). It is only when we are sorry for sin and repent that we are forgiven.

Back then, and still today, many want to follow Jesus without confessing their sin. In their pride they say 'I am no worse than anyone else; why should I have to say sorry'. 'I am not so bad' they say. Jesus should accept me as I am - I am only human. Oh we come up with some great excuses at times. But none are accepted by God. Unless you repent and believe in Jesus you will not be forgiven and will not enter the kingdom of God. The way is narrow and it is entered by only one door, a low door at which we must humble ourselves confessing our utter unworthiness before Jesus Christ, Lord and King.

Blessed are the poor in spirit for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are the meek not the proud. Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness not for the things of this world.

Weeping

Ezra read from the book of the Law of God. The people listened attentively. With the help of the Levites the people understood the reading. How did they respond to hearing the word of God? Did they start getting fidgety, looking at the clock and worrying about their lunch? Did they start wishing Ezra would stop soon so they could go home? Did they keep getting up and wandering around chatting among themselves? Did they drop off to sleep?

The apostle Paul had a fellow drop off to sleep while he was preaching. Paul preached all through the night. At midnight a young fellow fell into a deep sleep and fell out the third floor window to his death. Paul went down to bring him back to life and then went on preaching - and the people were all comforted.

What was the response to Ezra reading and preaching? All the people wept when they heard the words of the Law (8:9). Why did they weep? They were weeping out of sorrow not joy (8:11). They were weeping out of grief (8:11). Grief over what? Grief over their sin.

They had just heard what God required of them as his covenant people. They realized they had failed, that they had broken the covenant and deserved punishment under covenant law. They knew about the covenant but had neglected the word of God and hence not obeyed it. Hearing the Law again they understood that they were not conforming but transgressing the law of God.

This is exactly what the word of God does when it is read and understood. The Holy Spirit touches the hearts of those who hear so that they are convicted of their sin. They mourn and

weep over their sin. This is what happened with Ezra. This is what happened with the apostle Peter.

When Peter read and explained the Bible, explained how the promises were fulfilled in the cross and resurrection of Jesus, the people were cut to the heart (Acts 2:36). The words touched their innermost being. They stood guilty before God. They did not know what to say or to do. They asked the preacher 'what shall we do'? Unlike many today who tell the preacher what he should do, they asked the preacher 'what shall we do'.

In a true church, and with faithful preaching from the Bible, people will listen and humble themselves before the Lord. I was listening to a preacher the other day (radio broadcast) who had been preaching in the same church for almost twenty years. In that time he had seen many respond to the word he preached just as they did when Ezra preached. But there were some who had been coming to the church on and off all this time who had made no response whatsoever to the preached word. His words were like water off a ducks back.

This reminds us of the words of Isaiah 6:9 - *that seeing they may not see and hearing they may not understand*. Are you one who has been listening for a long time and not hearing, or are you one who listens carefully and prayerfully to the word of God that you may understand and obey? Does the word of God pierce your heart? *The word of God is living and powerful, sharper than any two edged word. It pierces even to the division of soul and spirit, of joints and marrow and is a discerner of the thoughts and intents of the heart* (Hebrews 4:12).

Many people have lost all sensitivity to sin and even to death. They no longer know how to mourn for either. Even at a funeral people want to joke about. All they think about is how the departed loved to drink or to party. Their consciences are seared; their understanding is darkened. They take nothing seriously, least of all sin and death. But ignoring such things does not make them go away. These are realities, fundamental facts of life and death. Judgment is also a fact. It is written in the word of God and this word stands firm no matter if people want to mock and make jokes.

May the Lord give us strength to keep on preaching his word and to stand firm in this day of darkness and hardness towards sin. May there be more weeping over sin. *Lament, mourn and weep* writes James to sinners (James 4:9). *Let your laughter be turned to mourning and your joy to gloom. Humble yourselves before the Lord and he will lift you up.*

Joy

Weeping over sin is not a futile exercise. We do not mourn or weep as those who have no hope. God is merciful and gracious. God forgives iniquity, transgression and sin (Exodus 34:6-7). This is written in the Books of Moses that Ezra was reading.

In the synagogue Jesus read from the book of Isaiah. He read of the gospel (good news) which proclaims liberty to the captives, and the year of the Lord's release. He spoke of freedom from bondage to sin and to death. That freedom is found in God's forgiveness of sin, forgiveness that comes through the blood of Jesus Christ.

The other day I was listening to talkback radio and the topic was guilt. Why do we feel guilty? Is guilt good or bad? So the talk went on. People called in telling of the guilt they have carried for years, guilt over some sin - but they did not mention that word. The 'experts' suggested that by writing a letter to say sorry they might get some peace, even after 25 years. Guilt is very powerful; it is very debilitating. The Bible speaks about guilt, and also about

forgiveness. The Prodigal Son felt the guilt of his sin. Not only had he sinned before his father but also before God. He confessed his sin and was forgiven. All sin is against God.

The people listening to Ezra did not weep with grief for 25 years. Nehemiah and Ezra said to them *this day is holy to the Lord your God; do not mourn or weep* (8:9). Some readers find conflict in the people's response and what these leaders told them to do. But there is no conflict. It was fitting for them to weep. They wept because the word of God cut them to the heart. But the same word of God promises forgiveness and hope. It is not fitting to remain in mourning. The Lord does not want his people to go about dressed in black and with long faces all the time (Psalm 30:11).

Because the Lord forgives those who repent and turn from sin we can be glad in him. *Do not sorrow* said Nehemiah, *for the joy of the Lord is your strength* (8:10). If the people went about in mourning all the time it would not bring glory to God. 'This day' they said 'is holy to the Lord'. Therefore do not mourn or weep but rejoice in the Lord because he forgives your sin and does not punish you as you deserve.

'Those who mourn will be comforted' said Jesus. Those who mourn over their sin and come before the Lord confessing their sin will receive forgiveness in the name of Jesus. They will know the joy of the Lord. They will praise God for his grace and mercy. They will eat together with glad and sincere hearts as at Pentecost. 'Rejoice' wrote the apostle Paul. Rejoice that your names are written in the Book of life. Rejoice in the Lord who is your strength.

In their rejoicing Nehemiah told the people to go have a feast. *Eat the fat* (rich food), *drink the sweet and send portions to those who have nothing prepared* (8:10). We get to eat rich food and drink sweet drinks all the time but not all people do. I can remember when we only had soft drinks at Christmas. Special occasions are celebrated with special food. Jews were not allowed to eat the fat or the blood (Leviticus 3:17), but could still enjoy rich food and sweet drink.

They were not to celebrate alone. They did not grab the best for themselves and go off to gorge themselves. They were told to share these good things with those who had nothing because they were poor or otherwise unprepared. Concern for those who have nothing is written in the Law of God. This is how those who are forgiven can express their gratitude to the Lord.

All the people went their way to eat and drink, to send portions and rejoice greatly (8:12). Why did they do this? Because they were told? Yes - but read on. *Because they understood the words that were declared to them.* There is something here pointing forward to the new covenant in the blood of Jesus Christ. Being set from sin by the Lord Jesus Christ is cause for us to rejoice in the Lord. We are to live with thankful and joyful hearts and to share this joy with our brothers and sisters in Christ. In the New Testament church they did this - they worshipped together and ate together with gladness - except for some selfish gluttons in the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 11:22).

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