

Sermon – 26/10/2008 pm

Temple Foundations Laid

Study Text: Ezra 3:7-13

While I was at the seminary in Dehra Dun earlier this year they had a groundbreaking ceremony. On a block of land near the main campus they plan to build apartments for staff and married students. All seminary staff and students gathered on the site one afternoon, along with the Christian engineer who will oversee the building. After prayer and a reading of Scripture the leader took a hoe and turned a sod of earth in this solemn ceremony. They were giving thanks for the Lord's provision of this land, and praying for safe and speedy construction. Afterwards sweets were distributed to all the people and there was great rejoicing.

Work Begins

The Lord had stirred up Cyrus king of Persia to get the temple in Jerusalem rebuilt. He made a proclamation allowing the people of God to return. He assisted them in every way, even giving money from the royal treasury (6:4). The word 'permission' in 3:7 is understood by some to include the idea of a grant. Cyrus was commanded by God *to build Him a house in Jerusalem* and he was determined to do so (1:2). The people praised God for this royal permission and they were taking full advantage of the favourable political situation – while at the same time rejecting political interference.

State-church relations have always been a difficult issue for the people of God. We read in the Bible how the people of Israel demanded a political leader, a king like other nations. God gave them such a king but this king was warned not to assume the role of a priest. King Uzziah did so and was judged. In pride he entered the temple to burn incense on the altar, even after being warned by the priest. The Lord struck him with leprosy (II Chronicles 26).

On the other hand priests were not to assume the role of the king. Our great High Priest Jesus Christ rejected attempts to make him a political leader (John 6:15). Yet the self-declared Vicar of Christ on earth takes the role of political leader of the Vatican state. Moreover, even the Church of England has the monarch as its head. We thank God for the clear teaching and stand taken by the Scottish Reformers in this matter of church-state relations.

We hold that God has ordained two authorities or jurisdictions, the church and the state, the one spiritual and the other civil. The state has the responsibility to uphold law and order and promote true religion, but not rule over the church. The church has the responsibility in spiritual matters and also to pray for civil leaders and make known to them the word of God, but not run the state. In the words of Neil McLeod (1978) 'in civil matters the church is subordinate to the state, and in spiritual matters the state is subordinate to the church'.

Rebuilding the temple was no small task. Even with all his resources King Solomon took seven years to build this temple. The remnant set about the task in the same way as Solomon. They traded with the people of Tyre and Sidon to get cedar logs from Lebanon. These were floated by sea to Joppa where carpenters took over the work of turning these logs into timbers

for the temple. Masons were employed to quarry large stones and lay them in the foundation of the temple.

The work commenced with a groundbreaking ceremony in the second month of the second year – the year 536BC. In the first year they rebuilt the altar in the seventh month and began to make sacrifices again. In the next few months they must have made the plans and done the preparations for rebuilding the temple. The timing of the work coincided, probably intentionally, with that of Solomon who also began work in the second month. In the first month was Passover but Ezra does not refer to this feast.

The work was a community effort. All the people of God were involved – but only the people of God. Zerubbabel and Joshua were overall in charge. The Levites were delegated as overseers. They were the priestly tribe, the tribe entrusted with the responsibility for religious rituals. The names of Jeshua, Kadmiel and Hodaviah (not Judah *cf.* 2:40) are listed, as in the previous chapter.

Worship

When the builders laid the foundation of the temple of the Lord the priests and Levites led in worship (3:10). As the foundation was laid there was great praise and thanksgiving. It was an interesting time of worship because some were shouting for joy while others were weeping with a loud voice (3:12). The old men who had seen the first temple wept aloud. It was not a weeping of disappointment in lost glory as some think, but rather a weeping for joy. They remembered long ago when they came up to this very spot to worship the Lord. For sure it was a magnificent temple that Solomon built but these people came with the hope of rebuilding this temple and once again worshipping God in his holy temple.

This great outpouring of emotion did not preclude orderly worship. Again the priest consulted the written word of God, this time what was prescribed by David, king of Israel (3:10). David had established guilds of musicians and singers to assist in temple worship. There were priests playing trumpets as written in the Law of Moses (Number 10:8), and the sons of Asaph with cymbals were leading the singing. The whole celebration was modelled on that at the dedication of the first temple (II Chronicles 5:11f).

*They sang responsively/antiphonally as they gave thanks and praise to the Lord:
He is good*

His mercy endures forever towards Israel (3:11)

We have an example of such responsive singing in Psalm 136, where we actually find the same response – *his mercy endures forever*. It would have been wonderful to be there to listen to the people singing praise to the Lord with all their heart. It would be even more wonderful to be there joining with them in singing to the Lord. Indeed do we not worship the same God? Why do we not sing to him as they did?

They ‘shouted with a great shout’ we read in verses 11, 12 and 13 – a shout so loud it was heard afar off. How different is the worship of many today. Sometimes only drums can be heard beating through amplifiers. There was music in Jerusalem but the volume was controlled by the voice not an electric switch. Moreover, it was the singing which was heard afar off. Some worship today is certainly not heard afar off. Rather a low mumble emerges from sleepy mouths and sneaks out the door of the church. Some singing induces sleep rather than exciting praise.

The picture we have here in this passage is of all the people singing and shouting for joy to the Lord. Their hearts were filled with the joy of the Lord. I hope you enjoy singing with all your heart when you come to worship the Lord. Our tunes must of course be conducive to such joy, but above all our hearts must be filled with the Spirit of God. We should be neither embarrassed nor proud but open our mouth to praise God, not to please men.

Is Christian worship a duty or a delight? Some regard it as a duty, coming to worship with a sombre face, groaning through the singing and sleeping through the sermon. Is that the picture we see in the passage before us? For sure we come to worship as commanded by God. For sure we worship according to what is written in the word of God. But that does not preclude an emotional response.

We cannot but notice the element of joy and gladness in the worship of these people in Jerusalem. We do not come before the Lord in Jerusalem but we do come before the same Lord. We come before his throne in heaven. We come with even more reason to be glad for we know the precious blood of Christ that cleanses us from all sin. We do not have to offer the blood of bulls and goats knowing that such sacrifices had to be repeated every day.

We may be few in number but so were these people. They had reason to fear the surrounding nations but they worshipped in faith. They met together on the rubble but with great hope in the Lord who had brought them back and promised them great things.

If we love the Lord with all our heart, all our soul and all our mind, then we will worship him with our whole being also. Our mind and our heart will be fully alert as we worship the Lord, alert to the things of God, alert to his kingdom and his righteousness. Let us join with these people in declaring that the Lord is good and his mercy endures forever. Let us say with the Psalmist (Psalm 84)

*My soul longs, yes, even faints
for the courts of the Lord,
my heart and my flesh cry out
for the living God.*

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