

Sermon Notes – Choral Evensong – 1st October 2017

Ezekiel 37:15-28 - The Two Sticks

The word of the Lord came to me: Mortal, take a stick and write on it, 'For Judah, and the Israelites associated with it'; then take another stick and write on it, 'For Joseph (the stick of Ephraim) and all the house of Israel associated with it'; and join them together into one stick, so that they may become one in your hand. And when your people say to you, 'Will you not show us what you mean by these?' say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I am about to take the stick of Joseph (which is in the hand of Ephraim) and the tribes of Israel associated with it; and I will put the stick of Judah upon it, and make them one stick, in order that they may be one in my hand. When the sticks on which you write are in your hand before their eyes, then say to them, Thus says the Lord God: I will take the people of Israel from the nations among which they have gone, and will gather them from every quarter, and bring them to their own land. I will make them one nation in the land, on the mountains of Israel; and one king shall be king over them all. Never again shall they be two nations, and never again shall they be divided into two kingdoms. They shall never again defile themselves with their idols and their detestable things, or with any of their transgressions. I will save them from all the apostasies into which they have fallen, and will cleanse them. Then they shall be my people, and I will be their God.

My servant David shall be king over them; and they shall all have one shepherd. They shall follow my ordinances and be careful to observe my statutes. They shall live in the land that I gave to my servant Jacob, in which your ancestors lived; they and their children and their children's children shall live there for ever; and my servant David shall be their prince for ever. I will make a covenant of peace with them; it shall be an everlasting covenant with them; and I will bless them and multiply them, and will set my sanctuary among them for evermore. My dwelling-place shall be with them; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Then the nations shall know that I the Lord sanctify Israel, when my sanctuary is among them for evermore.

The Hope of Israel

1. **Context:** Ezekiel was born in 662 BC in Israel – probably in Jerusalem as his father was a Priest of the House of Levi – a descendent of the famous' Zadok, the Priest' (Cf. *Handel's anthem composed for the Coronation of George 2nd in 1727 AD*). Zadok aided King David during the revolt of his son Absalom and was the first of a High Priestly dynasty who served in Solomon's Temple having anointed Solomon as King (after David).

So Ezekiel was, firstly, a senior priest in Jerusalem before and during it's capture by

Nebuchadnezzar – King of Babylon and its Empire. With some 10,000 Jews, the priests of Jerusalem, along with the religious vessels from the Temple, Ezekiel was taken captive to Babylon where, 5 years later, God began to speak to him: 'The word of the Lord came to me....' Thus began his ministry as a Prophet at the age of about 69 yrs, until he died. At the time of God's speaking to him he was standing by the River Chebar – a tributary of the Euphrates – in the Chaldean area of Babylon (modern day Iraq).

The Lord said to him, 'I have made you a watchman over the House of Israel....' to ensure that they returned to the Lord and didn't backslide into paganism, which would have been akin to committing National suicide – the captivity was intended to bring the people of Israel back to the Lord and to their land.

2. Before the captivity: Now, before their captivity the descendents of Jacob (renamed Israel) were divided. There were two kingdoms: Israel in the north and Judea in the south. How God's heart must have been saddened to see his Covenant people divided after the uniting reigns of David and Solomon. The holy nation was split in two and the split was a sign of sin within the people of God. Division is often a warning sign that something has gone wrong. Be the cause fear of neighbour, greed or lack of love, division is an indicator that God's blessing has been removed. The converse was understood to be true as well. E.g. Psalm 133 'How good and pleasant a thing it is when brothers and sisters live together in unity for there the Lord commands his blessing....'

In Christian thought and rhetoric, we have the Peace sometimes introduced with the words, '...Pursue all that makes for peace and builds up our common life.' Why? Because that's the environment in which God commands a his blessing and his grace flows – resulting in all flourishing.

So, for God's people, firstly divided (with the inevitable conflicts that ensued from that), and *then* separated from their homeland (a different sort of division), Ezekiel's prophecy is extremely poignant.

3. The Prophecy: The fact that, through Ezekiel God says that his people will be reunited, means that it's a strong message of hope. It declares that the season of discipline is ending; that their sins would be washed away and that they'd be given a new start – a united start – the context in which God's blessing comes and his grace flows. This is the Hope of Israel and foretells a time when unity will rule and they'll be *one* people, never again to be divided; that they'll never again defile themselves by falling into idolatrous practices with pagan gods. They will be *saved* from their apostasies and washed clean from their sin. And the Lord says, 'They shall be *my* people (once again) and *I* will be their God.' What a wonderful word of hope to this broken and hopeless people in captivity and exile!

4. The means of the hope: The Prophet continues with something more mysterious and says, in effect, 'When I've done this reconciling work and cleansing, my servant David will be king over them and they shall have one shepherd, (i.e. one king) and live in the land of their ancestors once again for ever.' The reason this is mysterious is because King David lived and died some 400 years earlier. Would he rise from the dead? The idea of a significant prophet or king returning can be seen in the Gospels; for instance, Jesus refers to John the Baptist as '...the Elijah who is to come' (*before the Messiah's reign on earth*).

Ezekiel then goes on to say, 'I will make a Covenant of Peace with them which will be an everlasting one.' I.e. As a people they've had the Abrahamic Covenant – in which his descendents would be a blessing to all nations; and then the Mosaic Covenant – in which they would be a 'holy nation' belonging to God – a 'kingdom of priests' who stood in the gap for the world. But now there would be a *New Covenant*, which will be permanent – never to be replaced – an everlasting one. And that's why the second part of our Bible is called The New Covenant, or in English parlance, The New Testament.

It is a covenant in which his people will be blessed and multiply; and God's dwelling will be with them – amongst them. 'They shall be my people, once again, and I will be their God. And all the nations shall know that I, the Lord, sanctify Israel when my sanctuary is among them for evermore.'

5. Conclusion: So, what do we make of this? For Christians, Christ is God's mediator of this New Covenant – He is the means for Israel to be saved with its Covenant of Peace leading to reconciliation and sanctification (*i.e. cleaning and made holy*).

For the Christian, Israel is a metaphor for the church which is described by Peter, in his First Letter, 'You are a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's own people, brought out of darkness (*captivity*) into his marvellous light and liberty: the same story being repeated with a broader and deeper meaning.'

But, for the Jew, the People of Israel, they are still awaiting King David (*a descendent of David*) to come to them, to bring them and all nations peace by ruling from Jerusalem. They are still awaiting the Messiah, (*which, in Greek is the Christ!*)