

Zechariah – Promised Return
2 Chronicles 36: 22-23

If you look at any Bank of England bank note you will notice the words printed on the front “*I promise to pay the bearer the sum of xxx pounds*”. A promise that we probably simply either don’t know is there, or if we do, we take for granted. After all, have any of us ever been refused payment in a shop or elsewhere when presenting our five, ten, twenty or fifty pounds note— no, the promise holds fast. Those of us who have worked in the banking industry will no doubt recall the phrase “*My word is my bond*”, a trust upon which countless deals and agreements were based through the ages from the early days of the 16th century London coffee shops – though sadly probably not so prevalent in today’s climate. Handshakes conducted on the eighteenth hole of the golf course or in the club house will have sealed many a transaction.

Anyone in a uniformed organisation as a child will remember the words spoken out each week “*I promise that I will do my best to do my duty to God and to The Queen, to help other people and to keep the Cub Scout Law*”.

Brides and Grooms make vows to one another in front of witnesses as a covenant between them.

Covenants, or promises, form an integral part of the Old Testament, with God making covenants with the people of Israel that, in return for their faithfulness to Him, he would bless them and watch over them and provide all their needs for all time. Time and again sadly, the people failed to live up to their side of the promise whilst God maintained his word at all times even when most provoked.

Through his appointed leaders and anointed prophets, God, in his infinite mercy and loving kindness, continually called to his beloved and chosen people to turn away from their idolatry and sin and return to the covenants made between them and their God.

So, promises play an important part in people’s lives, whether they are aware of them or not.

Imagine, if you can, living at the end of the 6th century BC. As a member of God’s chosen people of Israel you live in the belief that God will always protect you from harm and that he will watch over your coming ins and going outs. You have always tried your best to keep to the laws and commandments as given by God to Moses on Mount Sinai, and to live as godly and faithful a life that you can. You are aware that this is not the case with many of your contemporaries nor indeed with many of your forefathers. You have heard and listened to the words of warning from the prophets such as Jeremiah. Then, suddenly, as you sit on the surrounding hill watching down, the armies of King Nebuchadnezzar swarm down and destroy the great city of Jerusalem where you have always been taught to believe God lives. Eventually huge numbers of your family and friends are taken away by the enemy to live in exile away from your promised land, in the unknown and foreign land of Babylon.

Where is your God in all of this you cry out in your grief, rage and angst? Why has He forsaken us so?, you ask. What of all the promises you made to us, your chosen people? What will become of us now in our misery and strife?

But then, some words from the past slowly begin to come to mind. Bit by bit the clouds of despair part and there is a glimpse of light as you recall what Jeremiah, on behalf of God, told the people:- “*When 70 years are completed for Babylon I will come to you and fulfil my gracious promise to*

bring you back to this place. For I know the plans I have for you", declares the Lord, "plans to prosper you and not to harm you, plans to give you hope and a future."

and,

"The time is coming," declares the Lord, "when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and with the house of Judah. It will not be like the covenant I made with their forefathers when I took them by the hand to lead them out of Egypt, because they broke my covenant, though I was a husband to them", declares the Lord. "This is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after that time," declares the Lord. "I will put my law in their minds and write it on their hearts. I will be their God and they will be my people."

So, you think, perhaps God has a plan after all. He has promised that this time of despair and brokenness will pass, to be replaced by a time when once again, He will be our God and we will be His people, together, in Jerusalem. All I have to do now is wait for 70 years for this promise to be fulfilled. After all, God has never broken a promise to us before, has He?

And so you wait, and pray and hope, trusting in the promises that God gave to his people through Jeremiah.

Fast forward some 70 years later, and we come to our reading from 2 Chronicles 36: 22 & 23.

After that time, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, God moves Cyrus, the king of Persia who had defeated and caused the fall of Babylon, to proclaim that the temple in Jerusalem was to be rebuilt and that God's people were to return home.

Cyrus allows the Jewish captives to return to their homeland from Babylon, grants them religious freedom, encourages them to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem and provides for the funding of the move and reconstruction works.

But it is not only Jeremiah's prophecy that Cyrus' decree fulfilled. God has also spoken through the prophet Isaiah: *"I am the Lord....who says of Cyrus, He is my shepherd and will accomplish all that I please; he will say of Jerusalem, 'Let it be rebuilt', and of the temple, 'Let its foundations be laid'"*.

(Chapter 44 verse 28.) God had also foretold of Cyrus' overthrow of Babylon in the first five verses of Isaiah chapter 45.

So it seems that God had been working behind the scenes, bringing to fruition the 'plans' that he had spoken of through Jeremiah, plans to prosper his people, plans to give them a hope and a future.

Now that Cyrus had decreed the rebuilding of the temple here was prima facie evidence that God had not annulled His covenant with Israel. God in His mercy had restored his people just as he had promised on numerous occasions. Jeremiah, as the author of the Book of Lamentations, praises God thus, *"Because of the Lord's great love we are not consumed, for his compassions never fail. They are new every morning: great is your faithfulness."*

And so, in response to Cyrus' proclamation in fulfilment of God's promise, some of the exiles start making their return to the land of Judah, and to rebuild the temple in Jerusalem.

Just as the Jews had been taken into Babylonian exile in three stages, those who were to return to Judah under the invitation of the Persian King Cyrus, did so in three stages. The first group, under the governor Zerubbabel, returned when Cyrus issued his decree in 538BC. The second group returned with Ezra in 457BC. And the third group later returned in 444 BC under the leadership of Nehemiah. (Those who were with us at Christ Church in the spring of 2018 will no doubt recall our

series on Nehemiah and his rebuilding of the walls of Jerusalem, and his work, together with Ezra in re-establishing the worship to God).

In amongst the first group of exiles to return to Judah was Zechariah. His grandfather, Iddo, was a priest, and so it is likely that so too was Zechariah. He was born during the Babylonian exile and had therefore never seen Jerusalem until his family returned.

According to Ezra, (chapter 6 vs 14) Zechariah was a contemporary of Haggai the prophet, and he too served the Lord as a prophet, stirring up those who had returned from exile, to resume the work of rebuilding the Temple.

Zechariah, whose name means, “*The Lord Remembers*”, commences his writings and prophecies once he was in the land of Judah. Along with remembering the past reminding the people as to what had happened, and rebuking the people for their inaction in rebuilding the temple, he speaks in a series of strongly messianic prophecies of God’s great promises for Israel’s future. If Judah would but return to the Lord, the Lord would return to them, but in any event his word would continue to be executed – his promises would be realised, just as his promise to Jeremiah that the people would be freed from their period of exile was fulfilled.

One commentator writes that Zechariah’s book “*at one and the same time distils the wisdom of many of the earlier prophets, and brings the events of the far future into clear focus. The basic concerns of the book are judgement and salvation for Judah; the rebuilding of the temple as a sign of God’s presence; and the nation’s leaders in relation to God.*”

Zechariah is trying to preserve hope. Around him are a demoralised people, a damaged city, the temple was only foundations, no priesthood worthy of the name and any glory seemed long ago. Zechariah sought to inspire the people, and for the people this hope is inextricably linked to a king who was yet to come, and so much of his writing and prophecy is focused on describing this coming king. The New Testament Gospels quote Zechariah more than any other prophet in their narratives of Jesus’ last days, reflecting on Jesus as the Messiah. Along with Ezekiel, this book has a major influence on the book of Revelation.

Israel had certainly had her share of disappointing kings over the centuries. The books of Samuel, Kings and Chronicles attest to this history. But in Zechariah 9: 9-10, the prophet points to a coming king who would be different:-

“Rejoice greatly, O Daughter of Zion! Shout, Daughter of Jerusalem! See, your king comes to you, righteous and having salvation, gentle and riding on a donkey, on a colt, the foal of a donkey. He will proclaim peace to the nations. His rule will extend from sea to sea and the River to the ends of the earth.”

Zechariah is encouraging the people of Israel to be joyful, to get excited, because the promised one, the one sent from God, the long awaited king is coming. The message to the returned exiles was clear. God would respond to their repentance (in response to Solomon’s Prayer of Dedication to the Temple of the Lord when its building was completed). He would forgive their sin and heal their land. And, moreover, He would raise up a descendant of David who would rule over not only Israel but all the nations forever, just as Nathan the Prophet had foretold to King David.

Just as the writer of 2 Chronicles concludes his book by focusing on the faithfulness of God in bringing about his promise of salvation to the exiles in Babylon, Zechariah looks forward to a time when God in his utter faithfulness will fulfil his promise to the people of a future under the rule of a perfect descendant of David. Isaiah 9:7 - *...of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his Kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the Lord Almighty will accomplish this.*”

“One day, Zechariah is saying, the glory of the Lord will return. One day, the king will be back in Jerusalem.”

Zechariah receives his prophecy from the Lord Almighty, and is a part of the restoration of the people, the city and the temple; using his gift to encourage the people with a vision and plan greater than they themselves can imagine coming out of the devastation around them, because the vision and plan come from God.

There is a new hope and a new purpose in the hearts of the people of God.

So, (going back to our earlier imaginings) having waited, and prayed and hoped, you, after 70 years in exile, have seen the glory of the Lord in the fulfilment of the promise that you remembered that He gave to his people through Jeremiah. A promise that has upheld you and encouraged you over the decades until such time as you were able to return to your beloved homeland.

As you hear the words uttered by Zechariah about the promise of a great king to come who would bring salvation and hope to all people's you can only but leap for joy at the thought of what is to come because you have experienced and can testify to the fact that God keeps his promises.

God does indeed have a plan for each one of us, as we have seen the link from Jeremiah prophesying to the exile; through to Cyrus authorising and decreeing to the restoration, to Zechariah who now looks forward to the promise of the Messiah who will not only restore but will redeem the people to come and point the way to a new creation.

Jesus, of course, as the Son of God is the Messiah foretold by the prophets including Zechariah. John 3:16 tells us *“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.”*

Another promise given to us by God. And a promise that we can rely on as we look back on our series on the prophets as we see how God's Word was fulfilled time and again.

We too, like Zechariah, can look forward to a restoration and a redemption through the mercy of the Father expressed through the sacrifice of the Son. We can look forward to the promise of a new creation:- *“And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, ‘Now the dwelling of God is with men, and he will live with them. They will be his people, and God himself will be with them and be their God. He will wipe every tear from their eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.’” Revelation 21*

The new creation revealed by God to John in fulfilment of the words of Jeremiah's prophecy we read earlier about God's promise of a new covenant.

Like Zechariah we should be excited that God has kept to his promise and that he has made a new covenant with his people, including us as believers in Jesus Christ as our saviour, restorer and redeemer. A promise of hope and joy for the future that we know that we can rely on and that will come to fruition.

And whilst we wait, and pray and hope, trusting in the promises that God the Father gave to his people through the prophets and in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus the Son, we can live in the knowledge that wherever we are; whatever we are doing; whatever the situation, we will never be alone because God is with us bringing about the plans that he has for each one of us – plans to prosper us and not harm us, plans to give us a hope and a future in God's presence for all eternity.