

## Ezra 3

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### *Worship comes before building*

Last week we started asking the question ‘what does it take to revive God’s church?’ We ended up asking the much larger question of what forces drive history itself in certain directions. And we saw in Ezra 1 that the Bible’s answer to that question is simple and profound – God. God rules over history. Jesus rules over all things for the church. God moved the heart of the Cyrus the Persian Emperor. He did it to fulfil his promise and his purpose to restore his people to their homeland.

And God rules over Britain and Oxford and east Oxford and Magdalen Road Church today.

Ezra 1 establishes the broad framework for all that happens. We are not the victims of blind historical forces we are ruled over by a God who is determined to have a people for himself. God has blessed us as a church by giving us growth. God moves the hearts of people to come and find out about Jesus. God will determine whether we acquire the building we are looking at.

But having established that framework we can, this week, start to ask the question in a more specific way. The book of Ezra describes the return of God’s people Israel from exile and their efforts to reform themselves as God’s people. We noted last week that Ezra describes Israel as she evolves towards being a church. Gone are the grand days of a royal kingdom, and a secure land. In Ezra we see Israel becoming a people of faith in a hostile world. It will await the arrival of Jesus in the New Testament several hundred years later before the Christian church made up of people from all nations is finally created – but Ezra is pointing us in that direction.

So what answer do we get this week from that question ‘what does it take to revive God’s church?’

It is a simple one. It is a very important one. For some people it will be a surprising one. It is this: worship comes before building.

There is something really surprising that happens in Ezra 3. The people return to the land. There are lots of enemies around them. The city and the temple are in ruins. But they do not first rebuild the city walls for security. Or rebuild the Temple. Rather they set up an exposed, vulnerable, altar in the ruins of the Temple, and begin offering sacrifices.

This is really important. God’s people are revived and re-established, not by re-establishing the institutions of government, not by re-establishing security behind high walls, but by focusing people on the core essentials of their faith – worship comes before building.

Just in passing I cannot resist mentioning that this is part of a much wider pattern in the development of human societies. Some people suggest that human societies thrive simply through their access to resources – that it is the thesis of Jared Diamond’s book

Guns Germs and Steel, for instance. Some suggest that it is healthy institutions such as banks, good government, democracy and education that enables them to thrive. All of those things have their role but I am convinced that there is something much more foundational that enables societies to thrive. It is a mood, a set of common values, an ethos. Banking only thrives in an environment of trust – as we have seen. Democracy only works where most people have a sound sense of justice. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad of Iran is democratically elected, as was Hitler. In the long run it is ideas and commonly held values which enable a culture to thrive, or which bring it down.

In his book *The Victory of Reason* the sociologist Rodney Stark amasses considerable evidence against Jared Diamond's thesis and insists that 'ideas trump geography.' Indeed he insists that it was specifically Christianity which paved the way for the development of European democracy, banking, industry and so on. Ideas and values shape human societies.

So back to Ezra 3. Ezra 3 is going to describe the values, ideas, fundamental heart attitudes which enable God's people to thrive. 'Worship comes before building.'

Verses 1-6 describe their worship.

### ➤ *Their Worship - vv1-6*

In the first three verses are the preparations.

#### **Vv1-3**

In v 1 they are united. Literally they come together 'as one man.' It is a fascinating anticipation of Eph 2:15 where the apostle Paul says that Jesus purpose was

to create in himself one new man

which is the church. It would be lovely to simply assert that all people claiming the title of 'Christian' should be totally and visibly united. That wasn't even possible in the New Testament era as various heresies started to take hold – let alone today. But the unity of God's people is still important – especially in the local church.

Unity across racial divides – it was lovely last night to see people from cultures far removed from these isles trying to get their minds around the eccentricities of a Burns Night ceilidh.

We are in the process of multiplying to become three churches because of our growth as you know. And there is grieving as we prepare for this. There is grieving in my heart, and Judy's, and I am sure in the hearts of others. We must not let the pain of multiplying for the gospel, overflow into disunity.

Their worship is united, and it is obedient. In verses 2 and 4 we find 'in accordance with what is written.' God had prescribed how his people should worship and they obeyed.

And this worship is courageous. In verse 3 we read that despite their fear of the peoples around them they built their altar and they began their worship.

Courage is so important for God's people. It is so often cowardice which causes us to hide our faith rather than confess it at work. It is sometimes cowardice as much as avarice which makes us go for the secure job rather than the insecure one which we sense God wants us to take. It can be cowardice which makes the student miss Sunday worship in order to get that essay finely honed. In the end cowards can't worship God. In Revelation 21 the people excluded from the new creation include – cowards.

As they prepared for worship they were united, obedient, courageous.

And then the elements of their worship are really important. Most prominent are burnt offerings – for instance v 6

#### V6

There were various sacrifices in the Old Testament law but perhaps the burnt offerings were central. An animal would be killed and its body burned on the altar. It served as a substitute. The implication was clear. The people who brought it deserved death, because of their sin before the infinitely holy God. But the bull or ram was killed in their stead.

The New Testament makes it plain that this was a very imperfect provision. Not least notice that these sacrifices had to be done again and again. They looked forward to Jesus, who would die on the cross for our sins. In Jesus God was finally paying for our sins himself – because Jesus was the Son of God. Sin and forgiveness through sacrifice was central to their worship – and is to ours.

And then note that they celebrate the feast of Tabernacles. This was to remember their wandering in the wilderness for 40 years after they have been delivered from slavery in Egypt, and before they entered the promised land. They lived in makeshift booths called Tabernacles and for this feast they have to re-enact that.

They have returned to the promised land – but they are still on a journey.

The feast of Tabernacles features in John's gospel. By that time it had become associated with water since on more than one occasion God gave them water in the desert. So it is not by accident that John tells us

“On the last and greatest day of the festival, Jesus stood and said in a loud voice, “Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink. Whoever believes in me, as Scripture has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them.” (John 7:37–38, NIV)

And Tabernacles was associated with light because God had led them by a pillar of fire in the wilderness. So it is no accident that Jesus said again at the Feast of Tabernacles

“I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness, but will have the light of life.” (John 8:12, NIV)

The Israelites celebrated the Feast of Tabernacles – we celebrate Jesus. We too are on a journey in which Jesus provides us with living water, in which Jesus shines his light on the whole world.

Notice too that their worship is celebratory. They kept all the sacred festivals. V5

And the last element of their worship was the 'freewill offerings.' V5

Most worship was required but some was voluntary. Particularly there were drink offerings in which a libation could be poured out over the main sacrifice to indicate their voluntary giving of themselves.

On two occasions the apostle Paul describes himself as being poured out like a drink offering – Phil 2:17, 2 Tim 4:6. His life went beyond the minimum necessary. Offer your bodies as living sacrifices, he said in Rom 12:1, this is your spiritual act of worship.

Christian – here is how you will be restored to life and vitality as a believer. Keep Jesus' sacrifice for your sins central. Come to him for living water, and for light as you journey to the celestial city. And as God fills your heart with contentment and joy, give your life as a freewill offering.

Magdalen road Church this is how you will grow and thrive. Not through good leadership structures, or a new building, but through imprinting deep in our hearts – worship.

You who are not yet a Christian did you see what Jesus says? ANYONE who is thirsty come to me and drink. Did you see whose light he is? He is the light of THE WORLD.

➔ Don't say I will get other things sorted before I sort out what I believe about God – what you worship is foundational to your life.

## 1. The fruit of worship – vv7-13

### **Building**

Costly –

Hard work – v8

Youngest age possible in this time of need

### **Joy and longing –**

 **vv11-13**