

Zech 1:1-6

*Tim Anderson 12/2/2023*

We're starting something new today.

It's a challenge.

The prophet Zechariah.

I've never preached Zechariah before.

I think they covered Zechariah bundled with Haggai in one lecture when I was at Ridley.

Don't worry they said,

we've taught you how to learn,

you'll be well equipped to do the learning yourself

about the books we haven't had time to cover in detail.

OK. I have to admit I was worried

when I started reading over it while we on holidays at Apollo Bay.

"I don't understand this.

How am I meant to preach on it?

Help Lord!"

As he usually does when you ask for help,

God has come to my rescue.

He's done it in the form of an excellent commentary on Zechariah by Michael Stead.

Michael wrote his PhD on Zechariah,

which means he has done years of hard work on it.

But then he has helpfully written a commentary in the

'Reading the Bible today' series which is easy to read and understand.

That helps a lot.

It's one thing to write a PhD, it's completely another

to translate it into words that ordinary folk can understand.

That's called being a blessing to God's church.

If anyone is looking to look at Zechariah in their homegroups,

I thoroughly recommend Michael's book.

At the end of every chapter he has a section,

"Zechariah, Jesus and us"

which makes sure we don't get stuck in 500BC,

but we think about how what we've read applies to Christians.  
Michael's a bishop up in Sydney.  
But who knows, God may send him to Melbourne one day.

Anyway, let's get into Zechariah.

Zechariah was a prophet and he began speaking God's word  
in about November of 520BC.

That's pretty accurate, isn't it?

About 2540 years ago.

How do we know?

Well he tells us in verse 1 of our reading.

In the eighth month of the second year of Darius,  
the word of the Lord came to Zechariah,  
son of Berekiah, son of Iddo.

The eighth month of the second year of Darius was Nov 520BC.

What was the situation of God's people at that time?

It was about 67 years

after the nation had been carried off into exile in Babylon.

In 539BC or about 20 years earlier,

the Persian Emperor Cyrus had issued a decree  
that allowed the Jews to return home.

And some of them had made the journey  
from Babylon back to Jerusalem.

But by no means all of the Jews came home.

They'd had 50 years to settle down in Babylon.

They had jobs.

They had built houses.

They didn't necessarily want to leave it all behind.

Some of them, like Daniel

had risen high in the Babylonian and Persian Empires.

Some like Esther would continue to make an impact in Persia  
after the time of Zechariah.

Not everyone was keen to travel back to Jerusalem  
to a destroyed city

to undertake the back breaking and dangerous work of trying to rebuild.

But some of them had come back,  
and Zechariah was in Jerusalem prophesying to that group.  
So 67 years after the beginning of the exile,  
in the second year of Darius,  
the word of the Lord came to Zechariah.

It's an interesting introduction.

If you read through the books of Kings,  
you'll see that dates in Israel were usually reckoned  
from the time the King took the throne.

But it was the King of Israel or the King of Judah  
from whose reign the year was reckoned.

But here in Zechariah, the time is reckoned  
based on the reign of the pagan King Darius of Persia.

What is that telling us?

Israel had no king in Jerusalem.

They might have been living there for 20 years, some of them.

But they were still just a distant outpost of the Persian Empire.

They had no independence.

And so though they are back in the land,  
the exile continued.

How do you measure the exile?

The natural thing for us humans is to measure  
from when the people were deported to Babylon  
till when the people returned.

If you measured it like that,  
the exile only lasted 50 years.

But that's not how God measures the exile.

God measures the exile from when he left Jerusalem  
till when he returns.

God left Jerusalem when the temple was destroyed.

And God returns when the temple is rebuilt.

Because God's house on earth in the OT was the temple in Jerusalem.

Well that was a big introduction,

but it will help us understand

what Zechariah says to us in his first oracle.

1:2 "The Lord was very angry with your ancestors."

That is, the generation that Jeremiah and Ezekiel prophesied to  
were sent into exile because of their evil ways and evil practices.

Yes Babylon took them into exile,

but that was God's punishment on his people.

Babylon put into effect God's decree.

And now the challenge before God's people is,

"Do you want the exile to end?"

Jeremiah prophesied it would last 70 years.

It's been 67 years.

Time is almost up.

If you want this to be over,

we can put a stop to it.

That is the driving message behind Zechariah's prophesy.

At least in chapters 1-8.

The 70 years that God declared the exile would last for is nearly over.

Here's how things have to be if you want me to come back.

So what does Israel need to do?

1:3 "This is what the Lord Almighty says,

'Return to me,' declares the Lord Almighty,

'and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty".

What does Israel need to do?

They need to return to their Lord.

The word that is translated 'return' is used three times in our passage.

Each time it's translated by a different English word.

1:3 Return to me.

1:4 Turn from your evil ways.

1:6 Then they repented.

Return, Turn, Repent.

It's all the same Hebrew word.

To return to the Lord means to give God the honour he is entitled to

and it means to live according to his commands.

The previous generation had failed miserably at that.

This is what God says about them.

1:4 "Do not be like your ancestors,  
to whom the earlier prophets proclaimed:

"This is what the Lord Almighty says:

"Turn from your evil ways and your evil practices."

But they would not listen or pay attention to me, declares the Lord."

Zechariah is just quoting Jeremiah 25.

Jeremiah told his generation

to turn from their evil ways and evil practices.

And when they didn't,

he accused them of not listening to God.

What were those evil ways and evil practices?

Evil ways means immoral behaviour,  
like murder or stealing.

Evil practices means worshipping idols.

The people of Jeremiah's generation

had set up a place to worship Asherah in the Lord's temple, no less.

They were pretty brazen about it.

Jeremiah told them to stop.

By refusing to listen to Jeremiah,

they were rejecting the God who Jeremiah served.

So the question for Zechariah's generation is,

are they going to repeat the same mistakes as Jeremiah's generation?

It's an easy choice.

Listen to God or ignore him.

Zechariah makes the choice even easier for them.

1:5 "Where are your ancestors now?"

The answer is, the Babylonians came and destroyed them.

Many of them died while Nebuchadnezzar's army besieged Jerusalem.

Those that were left were carted off in chains and died in a foreign land.

They were rejected by their God

and removed from the face of the earth."

1:5 "And the prophets, do they live forever?"

Zechariah is not here talking about the true prophets like Jeremiah and Ezekiel.

God speaks of them he calls them 'my servants, the prophets'.

These are the prophets who told Jeremiah's generation,

"Don't worry folks.

All this doom and gloom that Jeremiah is speaking, it will never happen.

God has his temple here.

He will never allow his temple to be destroyed."

Did those prophets live forever?

No. They died in disgrace.

Their false promises found empty.

Do you want to be like them?

As the Lord says,

1:6 "But did not my words and my decrees, which I commanded my servants the prophets, overtake your ancestors?"

Yes they did.

Everything the true prophets said took place.

It's new generation with a new choice.

You can end up like them,

or you can make a different and better decision.

You can return to the Lord.

Well Zechariah's first oracle finishes on a very hopeful note.

The people listened.

As you read through the prophets,

God's people listening to the words of his prophets is pretty rare.

But here they did.

1:6 "Then they repented and said,

"The Lord Almighty has done to us

what our ways and practices deserve,

just as he determined to do."

Those evil ways of our nation, like murder and stealing.

Those evil practices of our nations, like worshipping idols.

We got what we deserved.

70 years in exile.

70 years without the presence of God living amongst us in his temple.

70 years where we were in captivity in a pagan nation.

That's what God said he would do if we didn't turn to him.

And he did what he said.

We deserved it.

And now we are taking Zechariah's invitation

which is the Lord's invitation,

and we are turning back to the Lord.

You know it's not easy to do that.

Most people when they have been punished for something,

they want to go on protesting their innocence.

Jails are full of innocent people.

At least if you go inside the jail and speak to the inmates,

the bulk of them will tell you they were innocent.

It wasn't their fault.

Someone else was to blame.

But God will return to those who acknowledge their guilt before him.

He won't return to those who are still protesting their innocence.

Or saying Yes but.

I did do it but I really shouldn't be held to account for all these reasons.

What does this mean for us,

who no longer live in a land of promise,

who no longer have God dwelling among us in his temple?

Well the call to us is still the same.

Last week we read the start of Jesus public ministry in Matthew.

What were the first words that Jesus proclaimed?

"Repent and believe the good news."

Repent means return to me.

Believe the good news.

What is that good news?  
 God has come to live amongst his people  
 in the person of the Lord Jesus.  
 That's pretty close to 'I will return to you'.  
 Return to me and I will return to you.  
 That's God's promise through Zechariah.  
 The journey of Christian discipleship begins with repentance.  
 It begins with turning away from evil ways,  
 that is an immoral life,  
 one that ignores God's commands.  
 And it begins with turning away from evil practices.  
 That is, a life worshipping things other than the one true God.  
 For us that won't be images of idols set up in God's temple.  
 But anything that we put ahead of God in our priorities is an idol.  
 We need to forsake these evil ways and evil practices.

But Zechariah doesn't only hold out to us a demand.  
 It also holds out to us a promise.  
 "I will return to you."  
 God has returned to us.  
 Having the Lord Jesus walking amongst us in human form  
 is far better than having God living with us in a temple  
 where we can't see him or listen to him speak directly.  
 Jesus is a far better sign of God's presence with us than the temple.  
 But you don't automatically gain the benefits of Jesus' presence.  
 God will only save those who return to him.

This is how Paul expressed it to the Thessalonian Christians.

1 Thess 1:9-10

"You turned to God from idols to serve the living and true God,  
 and to wait for his Son from heaven,  
 whom he raised from the dead -  
 Jesus - who rescues us from the coming wrath."  
 The Thessalonians turned to God.  
 And God's favour was upon them.



God promised them rescue from the day of judgement.

Most people in church today have turned to God like the Thessalonians.  
But it's likely that someone here  
has not made the step of turning to God.

If that's you,  
don't reassure yourself  
that just hanging out with these lovely people is enough.  
God requires that each of us turn to him individually.  
Your friends can't do it for you,  
your parents can't do it for you,  
your husband or wife can't do it for you.  
Every person needs to turn to God for themselves.  
And every person receives the promise of God,  
"I will return to you" individually.

I've been a minister in the church for 21 years now.  
In all of those 21 years,  
there have been people who come along to church  
who I have a very strong suspicion  
that they have not personally turned to God.  
I don't approach them and tell them that.  
If I did they would no doubt get offended  
and we'd never see them again.  
So I have to rely on the word of God preached to do its work.  
"Return to me," declares the Lord Almighty,  
"and I will return to you."

You have to hear that summons and know that God is calling you,  
you as an individual,  
and telling you to return to him.  
You have to take responsibility for your response to the Lord Jesus.  
I can't do it for you.

How about those of us who have returned to the Lord Almighty?  
How do we respond to this first oracle from the prophet Zechariah?

I think we take encouragement from the promise,  
"I will return to you".

God is with us.

If your family thinks you're a bit weird because you follow Jesus,  
well God is with us.

His approval is all we need.

Do you wonder

whether your efforts to serve the Lord are of any significance?

Most of us are only capable of making a modest contribution.

Maybe you help out at the Op Shop once a week.

Maybe you arrange the flowers or make teas and coffees.

And you wonder 'Am I making a difference?'

God is with us.

Remember the loaves and fishes.

God works through the most humble of contributions.

Maybe you used to be able to do all manner of things to serve  
and now you've got older and you can't do as many things any more.

Can you pray?

God is with us.

If we believe that God is with us,

then prayer becomes the most important thing we can do.

Maybe you look back at your life,  
and you regret some bad decisions along the way.

And you wonder,

have I stuffed things up beyond repair?

Return to me and I will return to you.

There are no strings attached to that.

Nothing is beyond repair with the Lord.

If you serve the Living and true God

and wait for his son from Heaven,

you can do that with a joyous heart.

Whatever you've stuffed up along the way,

he's got that.

Maybe you read this passage and you are distressed.  
Parts of the church you love  
are turning towards evil ways and evil practices.  
They are more like Jeremiah's generation, not Zechariah's generation.  
And you despair of the church.  
Well whose church is it?  
It's God's church.  
Remember that Zechariah's generation came after Jeremiah's generation.  
God will do his work of revitalising and renewal.  
You don't have to bear the burden of faithless parts of the church.  
You stay faithful.  
God is with you and he will not leave you.  
He might leave your church  
and if he does, I recommend finding a church  
that opens the door when the Lord Jesus knocks.  
You don't want to be part of a church that locks Jesus out.  
But if you stay faithful,  
he will never leave you nor forsake you.

"This is what the Lord Almighty says,  
'Return to me,' declares the Lord Almighty,  
'and I will return to you,' says the Lord Almighty".  
It's a challenge and a promise.  
Let's pray.