

Zech 7
Ritual religion
Tim Anderson 23/4/2023

This week the once every five years meeting of Gafcon has been taking place.

That's the meeting I went to in Jerusalem in 2018.

Gafcon is the group that seeks to encourage and support mission and ministry in the Anglican Church that is faithful to God's Word.

This time I chose not to attend.

It was in Kigali Rwanda this time and to be honest, I couldn't afford it.

I wouldn't have got any change out of \$10K if I had gone.

But I have been devouring the videos online all week.

The Gafcon meeting in Kigali has been a bit different from the one I attended in Jerusalem.

The big difference has been who is there.

At the meeting I attended

there were people there from about 50 countries.

But the primates or senior bishops were only there from 10 countries.

These are what are called the Gafcon primates.

They form a council that makes decisions about the future of the movement.

So we are talking about the ABs of Nigeria,

Uganda, Rwanda, Chile, Kenya, Burma,

Anglican Church of North America, Anglican Church of Brazil, and South Sudan.

People from all around the world were at the conference, but only those 10 countries have decided as a whole to support the Gafcon movement.

And the Anglicans in those 10 countries

make up 70% of all the Anglicans in the world.

But Kigali has been a bit different to that.

There are still people from 50 countries there.
And the Gafcon Primates are still there.
But this time the Global South Primates are also in attendance.
Who are the GSP?
They are the head bishops
of the poorer nations in the Anglican Communion.
So this year at Gafcon,
there were also the primates of Congo, Alexandria, Pakistan,
Indian Ocean and South East Asia.
Now we up to 85% of Anglican Communion
being represented by their primates at the conference.

Why did the GSP primates attend?
Well because the move by the C of E
to run same sex blessings in their churches
has created a desire to reorder the Anglican Communion.
In the videos I watched, Primate after Primate was queuing up to say
that they could no longer recognise the leadership
of the Archbishop of Canterbury in the Anglican Communion.
We need to reorder the structures of the Anglican Communion.
We need Gafcon and the Global South to work together in unity.
These are not my words.
They are the words of the head bishops
of province after province of the Anglican Communion.

What does this all have to do with Zech 7?
Quite a lot, it turns out.
The basic message of Zech 7
is that going through the religious motions is not good enough.
You need to listen to Word of God and obey it.
Beautiful liturgy and well ordered church processes are nothing
if they are not accompanied by heartfelt living by God's commands.

What was going on in Zech 7?
It was the fourth year of King Darius.

That is, two years after Zechariah's first vision in chapter 1 and two years before the completion of the building of the temple.

And the people of Bethel

sent a couple of representatives to the priests and the prophets to ask a theological question.

Now this is already a good sign.

You may remember that earlier in Israel's history,

the people of Bethel in the south and Dan in the north

decided that it was too far to travel to Jerusalem

to do their religious observance in the place that God had commanded.

So they built themselves idolatrous shrines

and opted to make their sacrifices close to home.

This was one of the first things that led the nation on the path to idolatry which eventually resulted in them going in to exile.

So the fact that people from Bethel are making the trip to Jerusalem to visit the priests and the prophets

to find out what they should be doing is a step forward.

It means that they are not ignoring God's appointed leaders.

That's positive.

What's the question they ask?

7:3 "Should I mourn and fast in the fifth month, as I have done for so many years?"

And then in Zechariah's answer,

he talks about fasts in the fifth and seventh months.

What were these fasts?

When the Babylonians came to take Israel into exile,

they destroyed the temple and sacked Jerusalem in the fifth month.

So in exile, the Jews had marked that month with fasts

as a solemn remembrance of what had happened to them because of their rebellion against God.

And the seventh month was when the last Davidic king

Gedaliah had been assassinated by the Babylonians.

Again they marked this anniversary with a fast.

It was not just because of the death of this one man.

It was because his death marked the end of the Davidic line.
It marked the end of God's covenant with David
or so they thought.

So while they were in exile,
the people marked these dates.
It was partly about reminding themselves
how they had gotten into this pickle.
And of course it was partly future focused.
We must never make the same mistakes again.

And so the thought is going through the minds
of the people from Bethel,
Well, the temple is getting towards being rebuilt.
Do we really need to commemorate its destruction
once it has been rebuilt?
God's curse on the nation would seem to have been taken away.
Is it still necessary.
And similarly with the king.
If God is going to place Zerubbabel on the throne,
a descendent of David on the throne of David,
is it time to stop mourning the death of Gedaliah 70 years go?

These seem like eminently reasonable questions.
But the Lord's answer through Zechariah
has spied something out about their hearts.
7:5 "Ask all the people of the land and the priests,
'When you fasted and mourned
in the fifth and seventh months of the past 70 years,
was it really for me that you were fasting?'"
Notice that although the people of Bethel were asking the question,
the answer came to all the people and the priests.
Zechariah does not have the people from Bethel in the frame
in particular.
They have just given him the opportunity

to give a word from the Lord to the nation.
And the answer is accusing.
God is saying to the nation,
when you were fasting,
it wasn't really about coming before me in repentance
for all of the things that caused me to send you into exile.
You were going through the religious motions.
It wasn't really about me.
It was about how you enjoyed your own religious observances.

Is it possible to enjoy a fast?
I speak as someone who really does like his food.
Yes it is.
Fasting can make you feel morally and spiritually superior.
But if what is making you feel morally and spiritual superior
is the fact that you have hunger pains,
and those hunger pains are due to a religious observance,
so you must be a very devout person,
well God has a question.
Was it really about repentance?
Or was it just about putting on a show that made you feel superior?

This was not a new question that Zechariah was putting out there.
If you were doing a fast,
how would you go about working out
if you were just doing it to satisfy your own religiosity
or because you had a genuine desire to turn to the Lord in repentance?
Our hearts are deceptive.
No one ever thinks to themselves,
"I will just make a religious show so I feel good about myself."
If you thought that to yourself,
then you would stop feeling good,
because you would know that you were a fraud.
When people do things to satisfy their own religiosity,
they always manage to convince themselves

that they are entirely genuine.
The lies that you tell yourself are the hardest ones to spot.

So how do you work it out,
if you are kidding yourself about turning your heart to the Lord?
Well God had already given a diagnostic question.
If your heart is really in your acts of worship,
then you will want to obey God in the rest of your life.
The prophet Isaiah many years earlier had said these words,
Is 58:6 "Is not this the kind of fasting I have chosen:
to loose the chains of injustice and to untie the cords of the yoke,
to set the oppressed free and break every yoke."
It's not that God is against fasts.
But he is against fasts
that don't result in devotion to his ways
overflowing into the rest of your life.

Zechariah reminds them of God's requirements in 9-10,
7:9-10 "This is what the Lord Almighty says,
'Administer true justice;
show mercy and compassion to one another.
Do not oppress the widow or the fatherless, the foreigner or the poor.
Do not plot evil against one another.'"
There is a striking similarity between those words and the words that
Jeremiah spoke to the people before the exile.
Jer 7:5-6 "If you really change your ways and your actions
and deal justly with each other justly,
if you do not oppress the foreigner, the fatherless or the widow
and do not shed innocent blood in this place ..."
In Jeremiah's day,
people were trusting in their temple observance.
A show of religiosity that would make them OK in God's sight.
Zechariah is saying,
"Don't go down that path.
It doesn't really matter if it's the temple

or the fasts you do because the temple has been destroyed.
 In either case, if it's not changing your heart
 to make you live God's ways, then it's a waste of time.

The application to the Church of England
 and indeed to our own church is clear.

You can have beautiful cathedrals like St Paul's in London,
 or Westminster Abbey,
 You can have heavenly sounding choirs like King's college choir.
 You can have clergy bedecked in the most ornate robes.
 You can have people speaking in the most cultured of accents.
 Holy, Holy, Holy.

It all counts for nothing
 if you want to bless in your churches actions that God calls sin.
 You haven't turned to God in repentance
 if you won't acknowledge the authority of his word.
 The show of religiosity is just a sham.

And so the rest of the Anglican Communion
 has said to the church of England,
 "It seems a bit strange
 to have an Anglican Communion without the mother church,
 but sadly, with tears, that is what we are going to have to do."

A show of religiosity without acknowledging the Lordship of Christ
 counts for absolutely nothing.

Did you come to church today
 because you were looking for God to speak to you through his word?
 Did you come with an openness and a willingness to amend your life?
 Or is it just because that's what you do on a Sunday?
 God is not into religious rituals for their own sake.
 He wants us to be serious about amending our lives.

Where do we need to administer true justice?

To show mercy and compassion to one another?

I have to say that I see encouraging signs of that at Holy Trinity. It's one of the reasons that I am proud to be called your minister. When Sandra and Greg front up to church with Jason and Toby, I think to myself,

"This is going above and beyond what is the usual expectation of folk in our community." Plenty of people wouldn't even know their great nephews' names, let alone give them a safe place to stay when they need it.

That's mercy and compassion.

As Christians,

we ought to be going further than the usual expectations of our community.

And of course, Sandra and Greg are not the only ones.

Nikki Driscoll took in her grandson when he needed a safe place, so did Val Dunleavy.

Hannah Belfrage had her brother living in a caravan at her place.

And you could think about the investment of energy that makes Trinity Tucker run.

Sandra, Barbara and Robbie along with a good sized team put a lot of time and energy into that.

That's showing true justice, mercy and compassion.

Or the brekky at the High School.

Robbie, Deirdre, Nikki and Werner are at the school before any of the teachers.

There is true mercy and compassion in making sure kids don't start the day with an empty stomach.

Our Op shop shows mercy and compassion in supporting the organisations that do good in the community.

There is actually plenty of evidence that many people in our church

are not just going through the religious motions.

But that's not to say that we couldn't do better.

Living radically counter cultural lives doesn't happen on auto pilot.

If you are on auto pilot,

then you will blend in with the people around you.

That's what happens if you drift along
without thinking too much about stuff,

you start to look a lot like the people around you.

People who are radically counter cultural

have to be very intentional about how they go about things.

I think about Ben and Gloria Kwashi.

Ben is the Archbishop of Jos in Nigeria

and the outgoing chairman of Gafcon.

But it's his wife Gloria who I'm thinking about today.

She has adopted more than 50 children into their family.

Whenever there are orphaned or abandoned kids,

which there are in war torn Northern Nigeria,

she just takes them in.

And then they run a herd of cows to generate the income to feed,
clothe and educate all the kids.

You have to think about things very intentionally to be like that.

It's a different mindset.

What would you think if there was a Mosque next door to your house
that woke you up every morning at 4am

broadcasting their call to prayer over the loudspeaker?

Would you soundproof your house?

That wasn't Ben Kwashi's response.

He decided that the 4am call to prayer was calling him to get up,
read the Bible, and get to know Jesus better.

And then to pray for the people in the mosque

that they might be released from the slavery of Islam.

So that's what he does.

It's a different kind of thinking, isn't it?

The warning of Zechariah is,

"Don't be like the people who listened to the prophet Jeremiah. He warned them about going through the religious motions. They didn't listen and ended up in exile. You don't want to go there. Instead make sure that your religious observance comes out of a heart that want to be changed: that wants to live out God's justice, mercy and compassion."