

Rev G Hamilton Sun 30 May 2021

## INTRO

Do you ever binge on box sets- of DVDs or streaming from iPlayer, Amazon or Netflix. You settle down to watch one episode, and are so gripped by the drama that you watch several in a row, or a whole season? Some popular series run to many seasons; The Sopranos, Game of Thrones, NCIS, Line of Duty, the Crown? And soap operas run for decades. But the longest and grandest series of all is the true story of God's people: we might call it "**The Chosen**". We are familiar with the penultimate season, when Jesus appears, and we are characters in the final season. But this week we are going to engage with the season just before Jesus. And as you listened to the Bible this morning, it may not have set your pulse racing. It may have sounded as exciting as the APCM yesterday. APCMs are a legal necessity, but we do not look for high drama. We receive written reports and accounts for the year past, and elect churchwardens and PCC members for the year ahead. And you may have low expectations after our bible reading from Ezra, with its lists of names, inventory of items in the Temple, and imperial Persian decrees. But from these dry and dusty documents the bible writer lights a brightly blazing beacon to the glory of God, at a critical moment in the great story of God's dealing with humanity. We might call this season "**Rebuilding the Ruins**".

Let me remind you of the what happened **Previously** in earlier seasons. God created humanity to live with him in paradise, the garden of God. But Adam and Eve rebelled and were exiled from the garden. Then God chose Abraham to form a new people of God, who would trust him, promising to bless the whole earth through him, and give him a promised land.

The descendants of Abraham multiplied but became slaves in Egypt. Then God chose Moses to rescue his people from Pharaoh. The LORD came and dwelt among his people in the Ark and Tabernacle and brought them through the wilderness back into to the Promised land. Eventually they possessed the land under the leadership of an anointed King David, and Solomon built a magnificent Temple. But the people kept breaking faith with God, worshipping idols, oppressing one another, and ignoring the prophets sent to warn them till eventually the LORD sent them away from the Promised Land into exile. In a series of harsh campaigns, starting in 605 BC King Nebuchadnezzar took the people of Judah into exile, and when the remnant rebelled, he destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the Temple in 587, and deported the people to Babylon. This was a **total catastrophe**, and surely the end of the whole series of the Chosen: the failure of all the promises to Abraham, Moses and David- the total loss of land, and blessing, of God's presence with a chosen people.

And then Ezra 1.1 announces quietly a complete revolution, a new start for God's plan and God's people, that shows that God has not lost his power or forgotten his promises. Did you spot it? Or did you miss what just happened? Ezra shows us how

**The Lord stirs the Spirit of Cyrus to display his Sovereignty  
and the spirit of his people to demonstrate his Faithfulness to promises**  
and this is still our God, fulfilling in us his promises to Abraham-David



## The LORD who stirs the spirit

### POINT ONE: THE LORD STIRS THE SPIRIT OF CYRUS

The Babylonian Empire did not last long-60-70 yrs. In 539BC Cyrus King of Persia swept like a whirlwind across Asia, and established the biggest empire the world had ever known; it reached



from India to Egypt. You can see a map above.

He captured Babylon and killed Belshazzar, the grandson of Nebuchadnezzar: the story is in Daniel ch 5. And then the bible claims he made an astonishing announcement.

v.2 “Thus says Cyrus king of Persia: The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth, and he has charged me to build him a house at Jerusalem, which is in Judah.

After years of exile, the Jews, powerless and hopeless, are suddenly told by the new king: you can go home. Could they believe it?

Some scholars could not believe this- absurd to think Cyrus became a Jew? But in 1879AD a clay tablet was discovered in the temple of the

Moon Goddess in ancient Ur, in which King Cyrus announces that exiles can return home, restore their temples and returns the captured idols. Cyrus has found a new way to hold his vast empire of 127 provinces together - by practising religious tolerance. It wasn't that Cyrus had become a Jew: the evidence is that he worshipped Marduk - he simply wanted the support of every god to uphold his political power. So he wants the Jews to return to Jerusalem, build their temple and sacrifice, providing they pray for him.



He even returns the gold and silver vessels looted from the Temple in 587BC and hands them over to Shezzbazaar, who he has appointed as prince or chief leader of Judah. This much is simply historical fact.

But the writer of Ezra and Nehemiah (they were originally one book) says v.1 In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, that the word of the LORD by the mouth of Jeremiah might be fulfilled, the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus king of Persia

he claims: ‘**This was the Lord’s work.**’ Our God is not just the little local god of Jerusalem, but the

God of Heaven and he can stir the spirit of Kings.

Prov 21.1 In the LORD’S hand the king’s heart is a stream of water that he channels toward all who please him.

## The LORD who stirs the spirit

And this is not the fancy of Ezra on his own. This is exactly what God had promised to do through the prophets. Jeremiah was the prophet who lived through the destruction of Jerusalem, who warned the kings and people of Judah that the Lord would destroy them.

**Jer 25.11** This whole country will become a desolate wasteland, and these nations will serve the king of Babylon seventy years.

But at the end of his life he also saw a ray of hope:

Jer 29. This is what the LORD says: “When seventy years are completed for Babylon, I will come to you and fulfill my good promise to bring you back to this place.<sup>11</sup> 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.

Jeremiah foresaw 70 years of exile, and God revealed to the prophet **Isaiah** that he would use a pagan king called Cyrus as his chosen and anointed instrument:

**Isa 44.28** [The LORD] 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.”’

**Isa 45:13** I will raise up **Cyrus** in my righteousness: I will make all his ways straight. He will rebuild my city, and set my exiles free, but not for a price or reward, says the LORD Almighty.”

What an astonishing claim: the LORD stirred up the spirit of Cyrus!

This is an event on the same scale as the exodus from Egypt. But it is different: instead of the Lord with a mighty right hand battering down the the hard heart of Pharaoh with plagues, he stirs up the spirit of Cyrus to send his people home. Instead of the Israelites plundering Egypt for its treasures, the people of Babylon gladly support those returning. Instead of 40 years in the wilderness, the Exiles have a simple 900 mile walk home. The LORD fulfils his promise and his purpose, but he does so with paperwork not plagues: an imperial decree, not a mighty right hand. Our God is sovereign. He will fulfil his purpose and keep his promises, but always surprises us with his ways. If you look at the world and despair at the chaos of government, or the overwhelming crises, remember this: the God of heaven is sovereign: he can stir the spirit of kings, and presidents, and turn the world upside down, and he has promised to do so, for the sake of his people. We must trust him and wait, just as Christians under Soviet communism had to endure 70 years of oppression until the Berlin Wall fell. But what God does with his people is equally astonishing.

### THE LORD STIRS THE SPIRIT OF HIS PEOPLE

Consider for a moment what the first generation of exiles must have felt when they were marched away to Babylon, leaving behind the smoking ruins of Jerusalem and the Temple. They had believed that God had chosen the line of David for ever, that the Promised Land was theirs for ever, that Jerusalem could never fall. And now all God’s promises are broken.

Many of the psalms express their anguish: (ps 137)

By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion.

<sup>4</sup> How can we sing the songs of the LORD while in a foreign land?

<sup>5</sup> If I forget you, Jerusalem, may my right hand forget its skill. (Psalm 137)

But how is it that they did not lose their faith? The

Ancients understood that the reputation of a god depended on his people. If the people of Israel had been defeated by the people of Babylon, then the God of

Israel had been defeated - he was clearly no match for the Babylonian gods like Bel and Nebo. Why would they even try to sing the Lord’s song in a foreign land? Some no doubt lost faith. The ten tribes of Israel had been exiled 150 years before, and have disappeared from history; why not the two tribes of Benjamin and Judah?



## The LORD who stirs the spirit

Because the LORD keeps his promises and stirred up the spirit of his chosen people. They had no temple in which to sacrifice, so they invented a new way to worship - the synagogue, and they met and sang the psalms and read the scriptures as they never had done before. For 70 years they met and prayed, and some fasted, and the faith was not lost. It did not die out with the generation that could remember the promised land. They treasured the promises of Jeremiah and Isaiah, the promises to Abraham, Moses and David. After 70 years in exile another two, if not three generations had grown up, who had never known Jerusalem.

The exile in Babylon was not like slavery in Egypt. We imagine the Israelite slaves toiling to build the pyramids, trying to make bricks without straw, but the Babylonians did not treat the exiles like slaves. They allowed them to build houses, grow families and do business. And the Jews, as we may now call them, flourished. Some rose to high office in the government, like Daniel, and others became wealthy. So when Cyrus said, "You can all go home!" they didn't all want to. They had homes, families, servants. Why leave all that for a 900 mile walk back to a completely ruined city? We missed out a long list of names in chapter 2, but a close study reveals that 42,360 Jews returned, of whom 10% were priests (they must have played a large part in keeping the faith alive), but only 74 Levites. They brought with them 7337 servants, and 200 musicians for amusement. Others came later, or gave generous gifts to support the returners, who saw themselves as the new, the true Israelites, led by Shezzbazzar and the eleven leaders of ch 2.2. And when they finally arrived in Jerusalem - a three month journey- they presented gifts and set about finding somewhere to live among the ruins.

Was there a sense of anti-climax? Sometimes we sing a song based on the prophecy of Isaiah 35: 10  
And the ransomed of the LORD shall return and come to Zion with singing;

everlasting joy shall be upon their heads;

they shall obtain gladness and joy, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

The longed for day had arrived, but there was no temple, no cloud of glory, the ark was long lost.

We shall see next week what they did, but today I want you to notice what the LORD had done. He had sustained his people with his Word- his prophetic promises- in a foreign land, through faithful priests and prophets, and stirred up his people not to escape from slavery, but to break away from comfort for the sake of his glory. And we shall see in the weeks to come how over a period of 80 years they overcome all kinds of opposition, restore worship, and rebuild the Temple, shape their communal life by the Law and restore the city walls. It may seem small, and slow, but the LORD was preparing the way for an even greater return, a more dramatic season, when a voice cries in the wilderness and LORD returns to his people, restores the line of David and brings the nations to worship him. Jesus could not be born in Bethlehem, until the town had been reoccupied; he could not come to the Temple, until the people had rebuilt it. And Jesus has come to gather all nations around him as a new and living temple of living stones, with Jesus as the cornerstone. Do not despise the day of small things. The Lord is still stirring up his people through his word.

APPLICATION: We have not spent 70 years in exile, but 60 weeks in lockdown. Some of the regular congregation have returned to public worship despite the irritating restrictions - no singing, face masks. The church is not in ruins, but things are not the same as they were before. Some of those who came before may not return, but others like the exiles have kept the faith at home, read the scriptures, prayed, joined in the new form of worship we have called live-streaming. But now is the time to travel back and rebuild the temple- a physical gathering of those who worship Jesus, praying and giving, and serving together. This book- this previous Season in God's story, may prove a great encouragement as we face this task. May the Lord stir up the spirits of his people to build the new Temple, the church of Jesus Christ again!

Stir up, O Lord, the wills of your faithful people; that they, plenteously bringing forth the fruit of good works, may by you be plenteously rewarded; through Jesus Christ our Lord.