

“A WORD FROM THE PROPHET – ZECHARIAH”

Zechariah 9:1-17

The issue that has taken up most air time on our news channels in recent weeks – if you discount reports of the pantomime that is taking place across the Atlantic at the moment – is probably the appalling war in Syria. Our television screens and newspapers are full of articles about and pictures of the terrible destruction that Syria, with the help of its Russian allies, is inflicting on those who oppose the brutal dictatorship of President Assad. Assad wants to cling on to his power and the rebels – for all kinds of reasons, not all of them laudable – want to wrest that power from him.

And when you look back through the corridors of history or read the reportage of other wars around the world, you can see that the primary motive for war is power. Nations, ruling elites, individual leaders want control, authority, power – power over resources, power over land, power over other people. Whether it's the Crusades and the Church's desperate bid to control the Holy Land, or the struggle to control European affairs in the First World War, or the West's desire to control the hearts, minds and mineral resources of the Middle East – you can see that it is the quest for power – either to gain it or to hold on to it – that drives those who go to war.

How does all that fit in with what we read in the Bible? Well, there's a fair bit of warring that goes on in the Old Testament, again to do with the need to have power, but also mixed up with ideas of judgement, justice and righteousness. Most of Old Testament history is concerned with Israel's struggle for nationhood, power, religious supremacy and racial purity in ways that we find rather difficult to understand today. But the New Testament seems more concerned with peace, with the Prince of Peace himself, with Jesus Christ, the Messiah. For the people of the Old Testament, looking forward to a Messiah meant looking forward to a figure who would establish his reign by exercising power. For the people of the New Testament, the Messiah was someone who had established God's rule with humility and love.

This morning, as we continue our brief tour through the Minor Prophets (only two to go after this!), we're going to dip into one of the longer books of that section and see what we can find here about this Messiah figure who was so eagerly and patiently awaited by God's people and see what we can learn of his person, character and kingdom. As with so many of The Minor Prophets, these little books at the end of the Old Testament, there are many quotations from them in the New Testament, and the passage we read this morning contains one quotations which is prominent in the story of Jesus as he rides into Jerusalem on what we now call Palm Sunday, seemingly for many as the conquering Messiah, but for others as the embodiment of humility and peace. We'll focus particularly on *Zechariah 9:9,10*.

Zechariah was preaching at the same time as Haggai, as the exiled people of God, who had been deported to Babylon many years before, were returning to their homes in Jerusalem. The Persian kings Cyrus and Darius had made it possible for the city to be rebuilt and for the Temple to be restored, if not to its former glory, at least to more than the heap of rubble it had been when the exiles returned. (If you're interested in the background to all this, look at the books of *Ezra* and *Nehemiah*.) As the people busied themselves with the task of restoration, Zechariah brought them God's message, often of rebuke, but even more often of encouragement and motivation. They needed to be able to look forward to the glories that lay in store for them if they were to have the enthusiasm that was needed to complete the work.

Here in chapter 9 we have firstly a prophecy regarding the ravages that were going to come upon the area through Alexander the Great in the next century, but also an exhortation to rejoice. There is little doubt, among both Jewish and Christian scholars, that what we have here is a clear Messianic prophecy, looking forward to the coming of the Anointed One whom God was going to send to his people. (The difference between Jewish and Christian interpretations is, of course, that Christians believe the Messiah has come and the Jewish people are still looking forward to it.) In the verses we have read this morning – in fact, in the two verses on which we are focussing – there are two clear reasons for God's people to rejoice.

1. YOUR KING IS COMING

Some of you here (though not many, I suspect) may remember Mrs Chesterfield, Tom Bywater and Kitty Thomas, all once members of this church but now sadly passed on. All three of them, I think, were recipients of the Maundy Money when the Queen came to Lichfield twenty-odd years ago. I remember Kitty Thomas showing me a scrapbook of photos and cuttings about the event. Many of the cuttings were from the local newspapers, articles and pictures that were published before the event itself, and it was fairly obvious that the expected coming of the Queen had generated a great deal of excitement in the city in the weeks leading up to the distribution of the Maundy Money. There may be some of you here who still recall that. This summer, the Queen visited the jewellers where our daughter Rowena was working in Edinburgh and her reports of the frantic preparations for that visit were highly entertaining!

These Old Testament prophecies express a similar sense of anticipation and excitement. The king is coming – but not just any old king: “*your king*”. This was the Davidic king, the Messianic king, **their** king. It wasn't the arrival of some foreign potentate, either on a state visit or, more likely, a marauding expedition. (Tom Wright in his book *The New Testament And The People Of God* reckons that every 44 years in the last four thousand an army has marched through Israel.) This was the king who had been part

of their national consciousness for generations, the king who was going to bring peace, prosperity and fulfilled promises.

What's more, this king was coming "*for you*". The NIV and a number of other versions translate this as "*to you*", but it is probably better rendered "*for you*" if we really want to do justice to the Hebrew. He was coming for their good, to benefit them and to ensure their safety and security. There's no doubt that the coming of this king was something well worth looking forward to. Jesus rode into Jerusalem as the climax of Israel's Old Testament history. He had all the qualities of the Messiah and was coming to his people, those who had been the people of promise down through the centuries. As it happens, many of them rejected him – and still do – but he kept his promise to come to his people. And he came to do them good, to bring them all the benefits which accompany his reign – a reign which continues and will eventually come to glorious fruition at the end of the age. In these words Zechariah identifies three things about him that speak to us of the Christ whom we worship and in whom our faith is grounded.

a) Righteous

For the people of Israel, to whom Zechariah was speaking, righteousness was the chief characteristic of the ideal king. Indeed, in the Ancient World as a whole, the ideal king was identifiable by his righteousness – his integrity and his justice. In Jesus we see this in two ways – one "active", one "passive".

Jesus was righteous as we are made righteous before God, in that he was vindicated by God himself. All the abuse and suffering which Jesus went through, culminating in his crucifixion on the cross at Golgotha and his resurrection on Easter Sunday morning was a means of God's showing that Jesus really did fulfil these prophecies about the Messiah. He went through suffering and anguish, and God honoured him for it, as Paul writes in *Philippians 2:8-10*.

*And being found in appearance as a man,
he humbled himself by becoming obedient to death—
even death on a cross!*

*Therefore God exalted him to the highest place
and gave him the name that is above every name,
that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow,
in heaven and on earth and under the earth,*

(If you really want to find out more about this, have a look at the recent books by John Piper and Tom Wright about justification.)

But his righteousness was also seen in his own activity. He administered justice and encouraged right behaviour and attitudes. He himself did no wrong and he lived his life as an example to others. He showed wisdom in his decisions and communicated that wisdom to others in his teaching. Jesus was undoubtedly the righteous king.

b) Having salvation

Our first thought on reading these words, especially as they are translated here in the NIV, might be that the Messiah, the Christ, is the one who brings salvation. But once again the Hebrew points us towards a passive interpretation. In this context, Jesus is not bringing salvation, but experiencing it himself. Now, we may protest that Jesus does not need salvation, he is sinless and spotless so has no need to be saved from punishment. But here we are looking at Jesus as Isaiah does towards the end of his prophecy – as the Suffering Servant, the figure who serves God and goes through the pain and humiliation of leaving heaven to become a weak and vulnerable human being before undergoing all the brutality of his trial and execution.

Now, if that were the end of the story, then Jesus could not be identified as the Messiah, and he could therefore have no saving effect on anyone else. But after Good Friday comes Easter Sunday. I don't believe that Jesus rose from the dead on that Easter Sunday morning, and many of our Easter hymns are misleading when they say such things as "*Up from the grave he arose*". It's why I always change the words of Noel Richards' song from "*He has risen*" to "*He is risen.*" It doesn't say that in the New Testament. The emphasis is wholly on the fact that God raised him from the dead. The Messiah was to be the Suffering Servant who was himself saved by God as a means of validating all that he was and all that he had said and done.

King Jesus offers us hope because he was, as Paul puts it, the first-fruits of those who are raised from the dead. There would be no hope for us if Jesus had raised himself. We could never hope to follow that, to do as he did. The hope we have comes because God raised him from the dead and has promised to raise us too. That's why we rejoice with the "*Daughters of Jerusalem*" that our king comes "*having salvation*". It is through him – and him alone – that salvation is offered. But it is God the Father who actually does the business for us.

c) Gentle

Zechariah mentions – and the Gospel writers emphasise – that this is a gentle and peaceable king. He comes to his people riding on a donkey. In the early part of the Old Testament, we read of the princes riding donkeys, and much has been made of that as a means of emphasising Jesus' royal descent. But by the time of Solomon, the nobility and certainly royalty had taken to riding horses – indeed, Solomon was noted for his horses. As the nobility took to riding horses, the donkey became the mount of the humble, the peaceable, the non-assertive. It's interesting to note the contrast with the "*war-horses*" that are mentioned in the next verse.

Jesus came among his people in humility and demonstrating his desire for peace. We sang earlier on Brenton Brown's words, "*You are the God of the humble, you are the humble king*". His conduct at his trial showed his gentleness. His behaviour as the disciples arrived for the Passover meal with him demonstrated his humility and he knelt to wash their feet. Jesus is a king who upholds and cares for the weary, the broken, the disadvantaged, the dispossessed. He does have the capacity to be angry and to rebuke, as we see (for example) in his actions in the Temple courtyards and challenging the hypocrites within the religious establishment, but he is primarily one who brings peace and who shows the way of compassion and humility.

2. THE KINGDOM IS COMING

Not only is the king coming to his people, but he is ushering in his kingdom, his rule. If the Queen visits some foreign country, she is usually received with acclaim, but the people there don't have the same sense of identification with her because they know she'll be off again in a few days and they can get on with their lives under their own ruler. But if she visits one of those countries of the Commonwealth over which she is at least the titular head, then passions run much hotter because the people know that she is the embodiment of a sovereignty which can actually affect their daily lives.

The Messiah comes not simply on a state visit to Jerusalem, but to inaugurate his rule, to usher in his kingdom. It will be a reign of peace, where, as *v10* explains, war will be no more and it will be eventually a kingdom that encompasses the whole world. There were plenty of hints in what Jesus said to his disciples during his time on earth that he was bringing in his kingdom. But it's also made pretty clear that his kingdom will not be fully realised until the end of the age. It's the constant tension between the now and the not yet that lies at the heart of our belief in Jesus' final victory over evil.

Yet we can be encouraged, because all of God's promises depend on the fact that the kingdom will come to fruition and his promise, his covenant with men and women has been sealed with his blood. When Zechariah's first listeners heard *v11*, their thoughts would probably have turned to the Passover, that occasion when the people of Israel prepared to leave Egypt to travel to a land God had promised them and the covenant made that day was sealed by blood on the doorposts of their homes. Our thoughts, as God's people today, now turn to the words Jesus spoke as he shared that Passover with his friends and which we shall hear again in a few minutes – "*This is my blood of the new covenant*". We can look forward to enjoying the peace and security of God's fulfilled kingdom because Jesus has shed his blood on the cross to make it not simply a possibility for us, but a complete certainty. Because of the blood of the covenant, we can look forward to being free for evermore.

As those who have been called by God to be his people, we live in that tension between the now and the not yet, between the two parts of this prophecy. Our king has come – Jesus came into the world and showed us his example of humility and gentleness: he has left us his teaching: he has begun to establish his kingly rule: he has shed his blood on our behalf. And so we rejoice, because that has had an effect on our lives, the reality of it is brought home to us through the work and power of the Holy Spirit within us.

And yet, the kingdom has still to come to complete fruition. It is blindingly obvious that we do not live in a world of peace and harmony – the briefest of glances at a daily newspaper is a stark reminder of that. There is no universal justice and righteousness in our world – even in our nation, even in our community. That could easily become a source of discouragement, but the fact that God has kept his promise in Jesus, that we can see just how these prophecies have begun to be fulfilled in Jesus, means that we can take heart and look forward to them being totally fulfilled in God's good time.

With the daughters of Jerusalem, we rejoice that our king has come and we rejoice that his kingdom will come. In the light of that, as we look back into history and as we look around us in our contemporary context, we are not discouraged at the memory of war and bloodshed, but encouraged in God. In his own mysterious way, God is working out his purposes and we are very much a part of that as we will acknowledge in our final hymn – *"There's a sound on the wind"*. But before that we recognise Jesus as King in our next song and celebrate the sealing of God's covenant of salvation in our communion together.

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Questions for discussion

- 1) Both Jewish and Christian scholars see this as a prophecy of the Messiah, but what is the difference between us?
- 2) What do you understand by the word "righteous"? How did Jesus embody it? How can we embody it?
- 3) In what ways can we see glimpses of the Kingdom of God in our world now? How can we help to extend that Kingdom?
- 4) What are the difficulties of living in the tension between "now" and "not yet"?
- 5) What gives you hope for the future? How can we communicate that to the world around us?