

EZEKIEL 17:1-11
WHO'S IN CHARGE?

Who's in charge? That's a question lots of people are asking about our world at the moment. Who's in charge of economic policy? Who is making decisions that will sort things out for us? We want someone to be in charge; we want someone who knows what they're doing to take control and sort it out. It is the same in other walks of life – when there is a crisis or trouble, we want someone to be in control of it. Famously in 1979, Jas Callaghan was Prime Minister during the Winter of Discontent and was reputed to have said 'Crisis? What crisis?' Apparently he never actually said it, but it did conspire to help him lose a general election to Margaret Thatcher and something of this attitude told against him; he seemed not to be in charge. We want someone to be in charge.

We give that place to all kinds of people. We want our politicians to be in charge of much of life, making decisions that will make life better for us. We want our City Council to be in charge of local issues so that life in the city is good and works well. We give teachers an amount of charge over our children and their education; we give our doctors a measure of charge over our healthcare; we give police charge over law and order; in Church we give those in leadership, ministers, elders, and others a measure of charge over decisions that affect church life. To do that, we need to place a certain amount of trust in these people and we expect that they will honour that trust by using that charge well and making wise and good decisions on our behalf.

As Christians we have one more layer to add to that – we believe that ultimate God is in charge, that God has the world in His hands and He is in charge. Our ultimate sense of trust has to be in God, that He is working our His purpose to bless the world and to bless us. We spoke earlier about Jesus as King and that is an idea that we should develop further and further: He is at the centre of all things; all things were made for Him; He is the Lord of heaven and earth. If that means anything, it means that He is in charge of our world. It doesn't mean that He is to blame for all the bad things that happen – bad things are part and parcel of life in our sinful, broken world and Jesus faced that and tasted that when He came into world, even tasting death. We can believe that while we see and face these hard things, we can also see the footprints of God's blessing at the same time and learn to trust Him.

That was whole point of Ezekiel's parable or allegory of the eagles and the vine. Let me tell you a story: there was a huge great cedar tree, a beautiful tree, and a great eagle came and snapped the top off that tree and took it away; he carried it to "*a land...*" (17:4) As this eagle left, he also planted some seed in the ground and that seed grew into a vine, with lots of branches, leaves and fruit: "*it had...*" (17:8) But there was another great eagle, a second bird and the vine then began to put out its roots and branches towards the second eagle and look to the second eagle for its life and vitality. But in the end, the vine will wither, be uprooted and die; it will bear no fruit and will wither away in the plot where it was growing. What does this story mean? What is God saying to His people through this allegory? What is Ezekiel's message to the people in captivity?

Eagle number one is Nebuchadnezzar, king of Babylon. He was conquering the world during the 6th Century BC and as part of his all-conquering plan, he invaded Israel. He took Israel into captivity in two stages: captivity part one took place in 597BC when he took the king and the top people from Israel into exile, prisoners in Babylon; they sat beside the river and mourned because they were people in exile. As he left, he planted a new king, Zedekiah, a puppet, to do Nebuchadnezzar's bidding; Zedekiah ruled under Nebuchadnezzar's command and control; there was a

treaty, a covenant and as long as Zedekiah did what he was told, what Nebuchadnezzar wanted, everything was fine; he could do nothing on his own. Zedekiah is the low-growing vine. This was all part of God's plan to judge His people for their sin and rebellion.

But there was eagle number two. Pharaoh in Egypt was the second eagle. Despite the treaty, Zedekiah decided that there was an attraction in Egypt, that perhaps Pharaoh might be his saviour, his rescuer, so he sent envoys to Egypt to sound them out; would they come to rescue Israel? The vine is sending its shoots towards the second eagle! Sadly for Zedekiah, Nebuchadnezzar got to hear of his treachery and came to Jerusalem a second time in 587BC and laid siege to the city and ultimately destroyed it, took more of the people to Babylon and destroyed the city, the temple, the palace and took all its treasures away. Zedekiah tried to escape (as we saw last week) but was taken prisoner, blinded, to Babylon.

The world has always known political intrigue. It has never gone away and we still marvel at the levels of behind-the-scenes intrigue that go on, of which we only hear about a very small amount. But there's another factor in Ezekiel 17 beyond the story and it is this: God is ultimately in charge of this story. Later in the chapter, when Ezekiel is explaining what this means, God says of Zedekiah "*I will...*" (17:20) and three times in these verses God says 'I will' do something. Behind the scenes, it is not Nebuchadnezzar who is in charge; it is not Pharaoh who is in charge; it is certainly not Zedekiah who is in charge of events; somehow, the One who is working out His purpose is the living God of Israel. God is King; God is constantly working out His plan for world. Zedekiah forgot that and put his trust elsewhere; he broke faith with God.

Zedekiah's problem was that he broke faith with God. The other prophets, especially Jeremiah were telling him to trust God and submit to Nebuchadnezzar. Israel had been a rebellious people and God was putting them through this hard time as a judgement on their rebellion; they were to learn to trust God, to wait upon God and know that ultimately, at some stage, God would come to rescue them again. That was the word of God for the people. But Zedekiah didn't listen; Zedekiah didn't trust God; instead he went off to put his trust in another political alliance; Pharaoh would be his saviour, so he thought. In breaking faith with Nebuchadnezzar's treaty, Zedekiah broke faith with God; so there was yet more rebellion, even less faith and it all fell apart.

God is in control; Jesus is our life. That should be the key reference point for us all way through life. When the world is in chaos and the banks collapse and politics in turmoil and nations go to war and these world events cause us to be afraid – God should be our reference point, and we should come back to see the world in light of the fact that God is its King and God loves us endlessly. When the community is facing difficult things and crises beset us locally; when people we know are in trouble and hurting; when we ourselves are going through tough, torrid times, when the wheels are falling off life as we know it – God should be our reference point, looking at these events, looking at life in light of the fact that God is King and that God loves us endlessly. Zedekiah forgot that; his reference point for life became a political alliance; he forgot that God is King and that God loves His people and he put his trust in something else.

The challenge for us is to stay connected to Jesus. Jesus used the picture of the vine to talk about Himself and His relationship with us, His disciples. The whole point of the picture of the vine in John chapter 15 is connectedness between Jesus and us; He is the vine, we take our life from Him; we must remain in Him. Our life, our faith,

our spiritual health and well-being depend on being connected to Jesus. That's not as easy as it sounds. For some reason, life seems to put enormous pressure on that sense of being connected; we face hard things in life and our faith is put under pressure and it begins to drift; we get busy with all sorts of other things in life and faith begins to drift; we look at the world and its issues and we wonder where God is in all of this and faith begins to drift. Before long, faith has drifted so far that we have lost any sense of being connected to Jesus; we have lost contact and it hard to get it back.

The challenge for us is to stay connected to Jesus all the way through life. God is not to blame for the hard things we face, so we can learn to trust Him even when we're in a dark, bleak place. Jesus has things to say about priorities in life and will enable us to live life well under pressure, so we can learn to trust Him, even when life is busy. As we've said already, God is in charge of our world, so when it appears to be in chaos, we can learn to put our trust in Him. It is a matter of trust – where does our trust lie, ultimately? In the bankers who look after our money - is that where our ultimate trust will lie for a better world? In politicians at whatever level as they make decisions on our behalf - is that where our ultimate trust will lie for better world? I would suggest that the only place where our ultimate trust should lie and we not be let down is with Jesus; He is King; our times are in His hands and there is no better place.

The last word goes to God: at end of Ezekiel 17, another shoot is being planted of another tree; God is planting a new tree; God is making a new nation, a new people. But God works in different ways: "*All the...*" (17:24) The low tree, dry tree, these are people who are humble enough to trust God; these are the people who will prosper and whom God will bless. The real last word: "*I the...*" (17:24) Our ultimate security, our ultimate fruitfulness is here with God. God will do as He has said; God will be true to His word; what He has said, He will do.

Politicians come and go; even superpowers come and go; Babylon is no more a glorious empire, but trouble-torn Iraq; the dynasties of the Pharaohs are no longer the powerhouse of Mediterranean; there is a generation grown up who say 'who was James Callaghan? Who was Margaret Thatcher?' Our trust, ultimately and fully should be in Jesus Christ; He is Lord, He is King, our times and our lives are in His hands and there is no better place for us to be; He is reliable, dependable and trustworthy for ever. We need to stay connected to JC; trust Him and let nothing move you.