

EZEKIEL 18:1-32
THE BLAME GAME

'It wisnae me!' Have you ever played the Blame Game? Let me tell you how it goes: something goes wrong; whose fault is it? Not yours! Someone else is to blame! Something once happened in our house; I can't remember now what it was, but someone was responsible; our three children were small at time and when asked, they each blamed other; it was really quite funny to watch, because without prompting, the blame went round in a circle, with each one blaming another, till each one could have been to blame. Who teaches children to do that? They do it by instinct!

Who's to blame for the way of the world, or for the mistakes we make as individuals and for our wrong doing? There is a whole lot of answers! We blame our genes, there is something in our make-up that makes wrongdoing inevitable; or our environment, the place in which people grow up conditions them to behave badly; or we blame government failures, or market forces, or school was good to us or was a bad experience; peer pressure has forced into behaving in a certain kind of way; or we are under stress and so we can't help behaving badly. You see how it goes: this is the blame game, someone else is to blame for things going wrong and sometimes we even include God in that list; it is all God's fault!

Ezekiel is having to deal with people who are playing the blame game. The people of Israel are in exile, living away from home, away from all the old familiar places, even the temple; they have even been told that God has gone away. So they play the blame game. They think they have good reason to play this game and nothing of their predicament in exile in Babylon is their fault, it would seem. It's someone else's fault. There was an old proverb: "*The fathers ...*" (18:2) 'This is our fathers' mess; we pay; there's nothing we can do!' The children pay for the sins of their fathers; so the blame is shifted. Or 'it's not fair!' how often have you heard people say that; here Israel in exile is saying that to God; 'God, it's not fair; we are paying for sins of our fathers here! It's not our fault; we're not to blame; it's not fair, you are not playing game properly!' All of this is based on this proverb: "*the fathers...*" (18:2)

Forget the proverb! That's Ezekiel's message to Israel in exile; forget the proverb and forget the blame game, trying to shift the blame onto someone else. 'Everyone is responsible'. "*For every ...*" (18:4a) Think about this for a minute. Here is a wonderful picture of life: every person belongs to God, every person matters to God and every person has a deep value to God; but the other side of that coin is that everyone is responsible to God for choices we make. This is Ezekiel's message: 'you are responsible; you have choices to make; make the right choices!' Ezekiel the prophet becomes Ezekiel the evangelist, because trying to persuade people of need to change to make the right choices. Everyone belongs to God; everyone matters to God; God wants everyone to enjoy life to full; so repent, change, love God!

He shows us what this means by an example of 3 generations. **Generation #1** – a righteous man and Ezekiel draws a picture of what this righteous man is like; the man who loves God behaves like this: he is loyal to God and does no idolatry, a big issue then (see ch 8); he is loyal to his wife; he is generous to the poor; he doesn't steal; he is fair and just; he lives life in God's way. This is a picture of the man who loves God. The righteous man will live – this is God's verdict on his life! He will live. **Generation #2** – his violent son; he is the exact opposite of his father; he does all the evil things his father has avoided; he avoids all the good things his father has done: he worships and prays to other gods; he commits adultery; he oppresses poor etc; he is generally a bad person. The verdict: "*Will such...*" (18:13) **Generation #3** – his son

who sees all the sins of his father and all the good points of his grandfather and wants to be more like his grandfather; he does all things his grandfather did and avoids all sins of his father. God's verdict – *"he will..." (18:17bf)* God will treat each man according to way he has lived his own life; each man is responsible for his own choices. Generation 2 can't live on his father's spiritual capital and generation 3 will not be made responsible for his father's faults.

The people with whom Ezekiel is talking are claiming to be generation #3 in this case study. They have a complaint: 'we are facing all this bad stuff and its' not our fault! We are being made to live away from home in a strange land; we are being made to sit by the rivers of Babylon and weep and its not our fault; we are being told that God has gone away and its not our fault; we are generation #3 in your story, Ezekiel and why should we be made to die for sins of our fathers; why is God being so unjust with us! It is our fathers' fault; it is God's fault and we are being made to pay!' But they are not generation #3; they are generation #2 because they are still the people who do wrong things; they are the people who have worshipped and prayed to idols and have forgotten God; they have forgotten to love God and love others; they are judged by God not because parents have sinned, but because they have kept sinning, they have perpetuated the faults and failings of parents and they are responsible for their own sins.

We are responsible for our own choices. Can make more choices today than ever before: we were in Kirriemuir last week and going out for a walk on Tuesday; if you've read my blog you'll have read about our walk up to Corrie Fee. We decided that we would have a bridie to take for lunch, so we went into the shop that sells bridies, thinking that all we had to do was ask for a bridie each. But, you can have a choice: there are onion bridies, non-onion bridies, flaky bridies, ordinary bridies – which to choose? We can make choices about education, about jobs, about all kinds of things; there is a phenomenon in the USA called 'option paralysis', defined as 'the tendency, when given unlimited choices, to make none.' God loves us; we belong to God; God longs to bless us richly; we are responsible before God for choices we make. The choices we make about life are much more important and significant choices than what colour of car we buy, or what kind of bridie we eat.

Ezekiel confronted the people of Israel with a life and death choice. The wicked man will face the consequences of his wickedness; the righteous man will have his righteous life credited to him. 'You choose what kind of people you will be!' There is a real choice here for Israel and the real possibility of change. This is hugely liberating: we do not need to be prisoners of our past; we can choose to change. It is also hugely challenging because change can go in both directions: we can choose to love God and follow Jesus, but we can also change to give up loving God and following Jesus; these are real choices that we can make and they go right to the root of who we are and what we are as human beings. Ultimately, nothing of who and what we are is conditional on our environment or is fault of government; we are the product of the choices we make in life and our relationship with God is no different. We may have inherited our faith from our parents, but it then needs to be our faith, and the way faith is nurtured (or not!) is the result of choices we make every day.

Change! The Bible calls this change repentance. Here's how Ezekiel explains it to Israel: *"Repent! Turn..." (18:30f)* in chapter 33, which we will look at next week, the people say *"Our offences and sins weigh us down."* Do you see what has changed? They have begun to take responsibility for their faults and mistakes; 'we are responsible; these are our sins, our faults, we have made mistakes.' Until we take responsibility for our faults and mistakes and until we realise that we are responsible, there can be no change, no repentance; when we take that responsibility and do turn

away from old ways, then there is room for the grace of God to be at work; God's glorious grace brings forgiveness and hope and life in all its fullness to us. This is what God really wants for us and from us: "*Do I...*" (18:32) and the real answers to these questions are 'no' and 'yes'; God takes no pleasure in the death of the wicked and delights when people turn to Him in faith.

This is what happened to Zaccheus. He was first of all made to face up to his responsibility for the kind of person he had been; was it Jesus who, for the first time made Zaccheus realise what a heel he had been? That he had been greedy? It wasn't the fault of the Romans for making him a tax-collector, but he was responsible for the kind of tax-collector he had become. So Zaccheus changed; he changed the whole direction of his life as we said earlier. He became a person who now wanted to love God and love other people and that led him to become a generous man and to choose to pay back the money he had stolen and to choose to give money to the poor. I suspect that for Zaccheus, every day he woke up, he had to make a choice about the kind of man he would be; would he still be a new man? Or would he go back to being the old kind of tax-collector?

These are the choices that we make every day. "*get a...*" (18:31) There are all sorts of ways in which we see our life: sometimes we think that somehow it is a great balance – we do this amount of bad things, so we need to do this amount of good things to outweigh them so that God will be kind to us, and we are a kind of walking bank statement! Or that nothing can ever cancel the past, like Hindu karma, the past lives on and there is nothing we can do! But here's the gospel: "*if a...*" (18:27) The past is forgotten, forgiven, gone! This is the grace of God at work in us. It is a question of direction: "It is not a matter of asking how much wickedness or how much righteousness there is in our past, but what direction are you facing now? Are you turned towards God or away from Him?" (Wright)

So, this is a choice we make every day, are we turned towards God or away from Him? We are going to sing our closing hymn in a moment and the second verse begins 'Now my heart's desire is to know you more' – is that really true? Is it really our heart's desire to know God and to know Him more and more? That's a choice we have to make. We have to make choices that feed that desire, by choosing to read the Bible, by choosing to pray, by choosing to come to Church. That desire to know God more and more won't come unless we choose it to come; we will not be turned towards God unless we choose to turn to Him. Later, when we've made wrong choices, we can't blame someone else. We are responsible, before God, for the choices we make; they are our choices and we are free to make them, for good or ill. Is your life directed towards God or away from Him? If you are headed away, turn round, repent, choose life. Live towards God – it is the better way, it is good for us and it is what God wants us to do.