

EZEKIEL 40:1-4; 43:1-7
THE HOMECOMING – PART 2

2009 is the year of the Homecoming in Scotland. The Homecoming is a series of events created, planned and put together by Scottish Government, and VisitScotland to celebrate Scotland and our culture. It began as a way of celebrating the 250th anniversary of birth of Robert Burns and has grown from there to include events from January to November 2009. The centre-piece will be an event called The Gathering in Edinburgh in July billed as “Scotland’s largest ever clan gathering” and that’s where this takes its energy from. Homecoming is all about bringing Scots from all across the world back to Scotland for at least some of 2009. It taps into the sense of Scots in exile, bringing them home to Scotland to reconnect with their roots; you come across some of the most passionately ‘Scottish’ people in Canada, Australia, the US and New Zealand. So the hope is that many will come back to visit Scotland and see that visit in 2009 will be seen as coming ‘home’! These people have gone away at the time of the Clearances, some later than that, some in the last 40 years or so.

In another sense, there are lots of people in our world who are forced to live away from home. We call them refugees. It is almost impossible to know how many people there are across world who are classed as refugees of one kind or another. Some are physically forced out of their homes and made to leave; for others they find it necessary to leave home for economic or political reasons. If you were to ask someone living as a refugee anywhere then probably the first thing they would love to do is return home. All things being equal, it being wise and safe to do so, they simply want to return home. Nowhere else comes up to the mark; somewhere else is always not quite same as being at home.

Ezekiel was thinking this way; Israel was thinking like that. For 25 years some of them had been living in a foreign land; for 20 years Ezekiel had been exercising his ministry as a prophet, telling the people that God had gone away; they were being judged for their sin. They were a people without hope, in despair; there was no future for them that they could see. They simply wanted to return home. But that had seemed such a long way off. There had been no prospect of that kind of hope on the horizon for Ezekiel or for the people. Until now! Their attitude had begun to change with the vision of dry bones in chapter 37 that we looked at last Sunday; God can change things; people can find hope again; what was dead and dry can be brought back to life. There is hope; they might yet go home!

Then after 25 years of exile and after 20 years of ministry, Ezekiel is given a whole new vision to see. It takes up the whole of the rest of the book, 9 chapters from 40-48, but it is all one vision. Ezekiel could tell you the day, month and year when all this happened, in 573 BC, and “*on that...*” (40:1,2) What follows is like a virtual reality 3-D video tour of Jerusalem, its temple, the city itself, and the land around about it. God is saying to Ezekiel, ‘take a good look, listen well, concentrate hard and then tell people what you see.’ It is a vision full of hope, full of life for the people, because it is a vision full of God!

What does he see? Well, we can’t go into detail, we simply don’t have time, but there are 3 things that Ezekiel sees. First of all, he sees a new temple building. This is not quite an architect’s blueprint; it is not that kind of detail, but is like the kind of 3-D video that you now see at times on television when new buildings are being described; you see what the building will look like, an artist’s impression; or on the pages of the property guides in the newspapers if you look closely at images of new houses, there are words in small print that say ‘computer generated image’. Here we

see the perfect temple, symmetrical in numbers and in geometry. One of the great disasters of the past for Ezekiel was the destruction of the old temple; here is a new one. On his tour, he is taken to the very heart of the temple, to the most holy place, the place where God lived amongst His people and it is empty! God is not there and his heart sank.

But as he watched, out in the distance, there is a rumbling like a great waterfall and a light that makes the earth glow and it is moving towards the temple. This is the same vision that he had seen 20 years ago, of the great chariot-throne of God moving across plains of Babylon, the 'wheels with in wheels' (see chapter 1); it is the same vision that he had seen in chapter 11 as the glory of God left temple because of the sins of Israel. Now the glory of the Lord is coming back; God is returning to the Temple and "*then...* (43:5) God has come back home; God has come to live in His temple again; God is come back to live amongst His people. "*Son of...*" (43:7a) This is where God is most at home, amongst His people. This is the greatest homecoming Ezekiel could ever have seen; he was pained and in despair that God had gone away; he falls on his face in worship at thought of God living amongst His people all over again.

The second thing Ezekiel sees is a river. This is in chapter 47: "*the man...*" (47:1) The river comes from the temple and flows out across Israel growing and growing. "*As the...*" (47:3f) As the river goes on, it makes things grow; there are trees on its banks; there are fish; salt water is turned fresh; it is a life-giving river and the trees will not wither, the fruit will provide food and the leaves will bring healing. The river comes from the presence of God; God is its source. Here is a picture of a people who will be richly blessed by God, healed, restored, forgiven; a people who will enjoy God's blessings of peace and prosperity all over again; here are streams of life-giving water. Most of all, people will be blessed because their relationship with God has been restored and what had been judgment will now turn to grace again so that God will be bless, heal, and forgive.

The third thing Ezekiel sees is land of Israel. The land was really important to Israel in the Old Testament; it still is important to the Jews, hence all the battles they fight to preserve what they call 'Eretz Israel'. Here Ezekiel sees the land being divided up, the people being re-ordered, life being re-set; it's almost as if they are being taken right back to the beginning and told to start all over again as the people of God. Somehow the re-ordering of the land is symbolic of people re-ordering their lives and their priorities as the people of God, that 'the unruly and incorrigible wickedness of Israel (be) replaced by a nation living in well-ordered peace and harmony on the land.'" (Wright p.328) People who had got it all horribly wrong, are now to be resettled in ways of faith and obedience.

The key to all of this is very simple – God is there. This is the climax to Ezekiel's 20 year ministry; it doesn't get any better than this, to see a message of hope for his people, something grand to take back to trouble-torn, exiled refugees who are beginning to wake from their despair, a message that says 'God is there'; God is with His people; God will bless His people all over again; God will resettle His people in their homeland; they will be going home and God will be home with them. The very last words of Ezekiel sum this up: over the city gate, not the temple, but the city gate and all its life, its relationships, its families its work and business, all that makes a city – over the city gate is the name plate for the city and with these words Ezekiel's ministry signs off, his work done, there is no more to say: "The Lord is there". That will be the new name for the city; that is the way in which the city will be known. "The Lord is there".

The temple that Ezekiel saw wasn't built quite as he saw it and was never meant to be. This is vision in the Bible, not minute detail. There was a new temple built in Jerusalem, but not based on Ezekiel's blueprints. What Ezekiel gives us is a picture of God coming home to live among His people and coming to bless His people richly, with all manner of good gifts and God coming to re-order His people. That's what this is all about; it is about a relationship between God and His people, a relationship that had been broken, spoiled by the sin of the people, now being healed and mended by the grace of God and the people being able to enjoy the rich blessings of God all over again.

The Church is like the people in exile: the Church has lost its confidence; it is no longer sure of its role in society; of who we are; of what makes Church valuable. Here's what makes Church valuable and different: God is here. God is amongst us when we meet for worship. Our Sunday gatherings are not just social occasions and not social occasions first of all; there are groups that do social gatherings better than Church does. Our Sunday gatherings are for worship because God has promised to be here when we meet. Not only that, but God is with us wherever we go, always and everywhere. We are people who belong to God; God promises to bless us in every aspect of life, not just Sundays and faith, but every other day and every other part of life: work, school, family, relationships, as well as faith, prayer, and Church. God is with us. The river of life flows from the presence of God to bless, heal, forgive, restore, strengthen us.

Next Sunday is the first Sunday in the season of Advent, the season when our focus is clearly on the coming of Jesus into the world. I have been trying to think of a theme for this year's Advent services and nearest I have come yet to anything that I might use is this from The Message translation of John 1:14: "*The word became flesh and blood and moved into the neighbourhood.*" That is the great climax to his prophecy that Ezekiel never saw; here in Jesus we can now say that "The Lord is there" in a new way. God came into our world in Jesus Christ; Jesus is God become flesh and blood and moving into our neighbourhood, our world, our community, our life, all that makes up our world. Later Jesus would open up a new and living way for us to come to God for faith, when He died on cross, so that we would know for ourselves rivers of blessing, life-giving streams of grace from presence of God.

God is with us. The great, glorious, powerful God, the Creator of heaven and earth, is here! Wow! We don't deserve it, but He has promised to be here and to be with us wherever we go. Jesus is God come to our world. When God is here, He brings grace and blessing with Him, healing, forgiveness, love, hope, streams of living water to refresh us when we're weary and tired. We worship God, the living God; that's the centre of Sunday; all the other things that go on around this building today are secondary to worship, as we sing hymns to praise God and listen together for His word. Ezekiel told the people: 'The Lord is there; God has come home; He is with us. He will bless us and heal us. He wants us to live well-ordered and peaceful lives.' Nothing has changed! God is with us; He will bless and heal us; He wants us to live well-ordered and faith-full lives.