

GOD ON THE OUTSIDE? EZEKIEL 8

There is a famous picture of Jesus called *The Light of the world*; it was painted by the artist William Holman Hunt; it shows Jesus carrying a lamp in His hand, approaching a door. The door is a bit overgrown with weeds and thorns and Jesus knocks on the door. There is no handle on the outside of the door, so He can't open it from the outside; it can only be opened from the inside. It is a picture that clearly describes the words of Jesus: "*Here I...*" (Rev 3:20) This is a wonderful, powerful picture, a picture that mirrors so many people's experience of faith, that Jesus is knocking at the door of their heart and that we open the door and let Him in. But, this picture was written for a Church; here's a question that I'm not going to answer right away, but is one to mull over for a little while – how did He get outside in the first place? How did Jesus get outside the Church so that He needs to be allowed back in?

Did you ever watch *Through the keyhole*? Here was a television programme, hosted by David Frost, that took you into someone's house. You were taken into the living room, or the kitchen, or other parts of the house, with a voice-over commentary originally done by Loyd Grossman, telling you what you were seeing. It was a game show, so they had a panel of people whose task it was to try to guess whose house they were visiting; there were clues in the video. Ezekiel is taken into the Temple to be given a video documentary tour of Temple in Jerusalem with a voice-over commentary that says to him 'Ezekiel look at that; see what is happening in Jerusalem!' He is hundreds of miles away in Babylon; the date is September 17th 592BC; he is at home with group of Jewish elders who have come to ask him questions and consult him as the prophet. God gave him a vision, a dream perhaps, in which he is taken inside temple to see things he had never seen before; 'Ezekiel this is what is going on! Look at that! It is Alarming!'

There are four things that Ezekiel sees in this video-documentary of the Jerusalem temple, none of them good; this is not a tourist video, this is an insight into the spiritual life of Israel; this is what Israel's leaders were like.

1. An idol that provokes jealousy in God Just beside the North gate to the temple there was a huge statue. Asherah was a Canaanite goddess of fertility among other things; the people living around Israel worshipped Asherah and other gods and goddesses like her. All through the Old Testament there is a battle going on between Israel's covenant loyalty to the Lord and the worship of these local gods and goddesses. At the gate to the Temple there was a huge wooden statue to Asherah, put there by one of kings of Israel and the people could not come into the temple without going past it. There's worse to come.

2. a wall covered in creepy-crawlies "*Then he...*" (8:7, 10) There is a dark, secret room in the temple, not far away from the Holy of Holies where the Lord lived; the room is filled with the smoke of incense burners and the walls are covered with all kinds of animals and bugs. In the smoke-filled room there are 70 elders of Israel, leaders of the people and they are worshipping these animals, and praying (that's what the incense means) to these so-called gods of other nations and other peoples in the hope that these gods might answer their prayers in a way that the Lord seems not to be doing. There 's more...

3. women in tears – "*Then he...*" (8:14) Tammuz was a local Babylonian god who represented a dead hero of Babylon mythology and now was the centre of a cult that mourned his death. Here in the centre of the temple of the living God, people are

mourning a dead Babylon hero and looking to Tammuz for hope and help. There's more...

4. sun-worshipping priests – *“He then...” (8:16)* Now Ezekiel is as close to the centre and heart of the temple as he can be without being in the very Holy of Holies itself; this is as close to the presence of God as he can go. Priests, the very people chosen, trained to lead the people in their worship of the Lord have turned their backs on the presence of the Lord and are worshipping the sun instead. Their prayers are being directed to the sun rather than the living God.

There is a sickness at the heart of Israel according to this vision; the leadership of the nation has lost totally and completely lost its way. Each of these four parts to Ezekiel's vision represents some way in which the people have lost faith in the living God and replaced the Lord with other gods; their hopes are no longer pinned on the living Lord, but on the idols and gods of other nations and other peoples; the temple that is dedicated to the worship of the Lord, the house of the Lord, is being misused by statues, dark, secret practices in smoke-filled rooms, the worship of dead heroes, and sun worship; the leaders have turned their backs on the Lord; their covenant loyalty to the Lord has gone to be replaced by other things.

How does God react? Can we think of God as jealous? We think of jealousy as a bad thing, the green-eyed monster that makes us want things that other people have and we are jealous of them; they have things we want. In fact, jealousy has a whole other side to it because jealousy is about protecting a love that you have. If you are married, it is jealousy that wants to protect the relationship you have you're your husband or wife so that no-one else is allowed to share that intimacy; the relationship is yours and yours alone. The Lord and Israel had entered into a covenant, a loving relationship and they were to be loyal to each other, forsaking all others. Ezekiel's vision shows us quite clearly that Israel had broken that covenant; their loyalties had been spread, and given to others; God reacts with jealousy because someone else has been allowed to intrude on their covenant love and His people are lost.

In the end, one of the saddest things you will ever read in the Bible comes in chapter 10: *“Then the...” (10:18)* This was a slow process: God's glory leaves the temple but sits over the threshold, perhaps hoping that there would be a last-minute change of heart, but no! The glory of the Lord, God's presence with His people leaves even the threshold of temple and then finally in chapter 11 leaves the city itself. God has gone away; God has packed His bags and left His people; God is now on the outside because His people have turned their backs on Him; the leaders of Israel, the very people who should have known better, have turned backs, the people whose job it was to lead the people to God have led them to worship the sun instead. God has gone away; God is on the outside.

Christian leadership is a key spiritual battleground for the future of the Church, both the local church and the church nationally; the need is for good and godly leaders, leaders committed to the cause; it always has been a key spiritual battleground, but it is becoming more and more acute. “When Church leadership becomes corrupted there is no end to the chaos that is caused in the life of the nation.” (Taylor) When I first read that I thought it was too much, too big; now I'm not so sure. If the devil can persuade Church leaders that complete, utter and total commitment to Christ and the Church is matter to which we can sit lightly, then the battle is lost. If the devil can persuade us that other things are more important than commitment to Christ, if church leaders put their hopes and trust in things other than Christ, then the battle is lost. If we put our trust in business plans, management theory, statistical analysis,

mission strategies, even superstition, rather than in the power and grace of the living God, then we are facing in the wrong direction and the battle is lost.

Jesus is Lord! We say that Jesus is Lord; it trips off tongue so easily; three short words that, for generations, have been the clearest Christian confession of faith. To call Jesus Lord brings with it the challenge to take seriously the absolute centrality of Jesus for Christianity, for life and also for the local church. Two or three years ago, our summer mission was called *Seaside Rock* and at the end of the week we gave the children each a stick of rock and all way Through the rock was the legend “Jesus the Rock” If I can change the picture, what is the DNA that runs all the way through our Church? We like to think it is “Jesus the Rock” or “Jesus is Lord” but is it really? Or is it something else: “my way and no other way!” “It’s always been done this way!” “It’s someone else’s responsibility!” Or something else? When these others become the DNA running through the Church, Jesus is no longer Lord; the Church is no longer His; Jesus is on the outside looking in!

In the picture at the beginning why was Jesus on outside? Well, if you read the passage in Revelation chapter 3 on which the picture is based you find that the Church has a problem: they have become lukewarm. Here was a Church with a thoroughly good opinion of itself, it thought it was wonderful, but it was living on its past reputation; now it had lost its way; the people’s faith and commitment had become lukewarm; He was no longer Lord, He was no longer centre of the Church’s life in Laodicae; it had become lukewarm to Christ as Saviour and Lord. Jesus was on the outside looking in!

What to do?

Repent of our lukewarmness There are times when we have failed Jesus, times when we have forgotten that He is Lord, times when other things have been allowed to be more important than our commitment to Christ. We need to acknowledge these and say sorry and turn away from our faults and failings. Yet, at very time when Israel should have been kneeling before God, pouring out their hearts in repentance because the nation is in turmoil, that was the very time they had lost their way, and they worshipped statues, beasties, dead celebrities, sun. Church is in turmoil nationally; this is the very time when we should be on our knees, pouring out our hearts in repentance and this is the very time when we are in danger of losing our way. (Do we think we will always be immune from that decline?) – repentance for past faults and failings is needed.

Make sure that Jesus is Lord that He is absolutely central to all that we are. That means both for us individually and for us as local church. Let nothing get in way of Jesus being Lord; that way is the danger of lukewarmness! Make sure that the DNA running through our hearts and through the Church is ‘Jesus is Lord’ and that we do that, that we live that way.

Pray for leaders of Church. Quality leadership is crucial for the Church in the future, people of faith, godly people who pray, people who know their Bible, people for whom Jesus is Lord absolutely and totally. There was a sickness at the heart of Israel in Ezekiel 8 because the leaders had lost their way; God packed His bags and left! Don’t ever say ‘that can never happen here!’ Let’s heed the warning! It can happen anywhere. Don’t leave Jesus on the outside!