

EZRA 1:1-7

Robert Murray M'Cheyne was a minister in Dundee in the 1830's and 40's. During his ministry there, his congregation experienced a quite extraordinary revival, and it started when the minister was away! At the beginning of 1843, he put together a Bible reading plan for the congregation; it was called *Daily Bread*, with four chapters of the Bible to be read every day, two in secret and two as a family. The congregation would read the whole Old Testament once, the New Testament and Psalms twice in the year; he put this together because he wanted to make sure that his congregation would be able to stand firm in their faith and be able to meet the challenges of the new year and the times they were facing; if you know your church history, 1843 was a momentous year, the year of the Disruption and the founding of the Free Church, probably the single most difficult event in the life of the Church in Scotland since the reformation. He did this to grow the church; by reading the same passages each day he said "We shall pray over the same promises, mourn over the same confessions, praise God in the same songs, and be nourished by same words of eternal life" and, he said, they would have things to talk about when they meet.

The four readings for January 1st were Genesis 1, Matthew 1, Acts 1 and Ezra 1. These are new beginnings in the Bible story. We replaced Matthew with Mark today, but these are passages for the beginning of the year as we think about new starts in our lives; how do new starts in the Bible story help us see what we do next and what 2016 might have in store for us? Sometimes I feel we make too much of New Year and resolutions because they don't always mean very much; we resolve a new fitness regime, or a new diet, but by January 10th they are gone! But we do stand at start of a momentous year for a number of reasons: 2016 will see elections to the Scottish Parliament at Holyrood and these might just be elections that define the life of that Parliament for a long time to come; 2016 will see us as a congregation embark on a significant piece of work on this building that will not only re-shape the building, but will reshape us as a people too. There will be personal changes in 2016 that might well make your life different. What new starts are you making?

Ezra 1 is the beginning of the Jews coming home. They have been in exile since they had been taken captive in the days of Nebuchadnezzar and men like Daniel have come and gone and now they are about to begin to go home; it will take 100 years to finish the project, but here is where it begins. "The longest journey begins with the first step". Ezra himself doesn't appear until chapter 7, 80 years into the work. The work will be completed by Ezra and his friend Nehemiah and they and the people will be encouraged by prophets like Haggai and Zechariah. It will be a long job, a tortuous journey, a piece of work that will have lots of highlights, that will have so many challenges to get it right, will meet with a great deal of opposition and will come to grinding halts along the way and take 100 years to finish. But it will finish and the people will return home and they will be settled in their God-given land all over again. All along the way, God will be with them and will bless them. Here is a new beginning in the mission of God in the world through His people!

The main mover in this new beginning is the king called Cyrus. Cyrus was a pagan king, the founder of the Persian empire, king of Babylon. He said: "*The Lord...*" (*Ezra 1:2*) This pagan king saw that it was his God-given job to begin to rebuild Jerusalem and especially the Temple. He makes a proclamation to that effect, looking for people to engage in this project by going to Jerusalem to work, or looking to provide the means by which this project may be done. "*then the ...*" (*Ezra 1:5,6*) It worked: 43,000 people went to Jerusalem and their friends gave them the money and other things to do the work; the next 6 chapters tell the story of the rebuilding of the temple. Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding the city walls nearly 100 years later and by

c.430BC (100 years later) the work is done; the people are settled and secure in the city and in the land all over again. It all began when Cyrus made his proclamation and the people responded.

But there is 1 more significant theme in Ezra 1 that we have to see: *“In the...” (Ezra 1:1) “then the...” (Ezra 1:5a)* Twice, the story tells us that God stirred up people to do something. First, God stirred the heart of Cyrus to make a proclamation and then later God stirred the hearts of the people to respond to the challenge and go to Jerusalem; only a remnant went, perhaps – not everyone responded – but God stirred their hearts. By the rivers of Babylon, where the people of God wept because they were in exile and life was awful and *“how can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?” (Psalm 137:4)* – by the rivers of Babylon, God was with His people in their lonely exile and God was at work amongst His people in their exile, stirring their hearts. God is at work stirring up His people to a new beginning in their life as the people of God; God is at work challenging them to new discipleship; God is at work promising them help and providing for them – their friends and neighbours gave them what they needed. God was at work and this was a new beginning in their life because God had stirred the hearts of Cyrus and of the people. 43,000 responded!

This was a building project. The main job was to rebuild a shattered city. When Nebuchadnezzar left the city 60 years earlier, he had more or less destroyed it, set fire to the temple and the palaces, broken down the wall and *“destroyed everything of value” (2 Chronicles 36:19)* Their job now is to rebuild and Ezra tells the story of rebuilding the temple and Nehemiah tells the story of rebuilding the wall. But it is also a story of rebuilding a people in their spirit and in their faith. The two go hand in hand and as they go about working on their buildings, the people are also having their confidence in God renewed and revived; they are seeing God at work in new ways; they are seeing God provide for them in unprecedented ways; they are being challenged to trust God and believe His promises and walk in His ways and do His mission in their world all over again. Nehemiah chapter 8 is a great chapter, because it shows Ezra preaching. He is standing in his pulpit reading the Bible to the people gathered in the square and as he reads, there are small groups talking about what he’s reading and other people are giving the sense of what that Bible passage means. By this reading and preaching of the Bible, the people rediscover both the depth of their sin and the joy of the Lord in forgiveness and grace. Not only are the walls rebuilt, but the people rediscover something of their faith, something of the grace of God and their spirits are revived; they are a people with a new sense of being the people of God in their time and place and a new sense of being part of the mission of God in the world.

Scotland needs a strong church. I’m more convinced of that than ever. There is something about our life as a country and only the church can bring what we need. Scotland needs a strong church, just at a time when many congregations are struggling because they are getting older or smaller or both and are struggling to see what on earth they can bring to the life of their community. A strong church is not about being big! A strong church is about being a group of people who understand what we believe and who do a few things well. Strong churches are churches that have a good idea about themselves and who they are and what God is calling them to be and to do. Strong churches have people who know what faith is about, who know what we believe and who are ready to live it out and share it with others. Scotland may not know that it needs this kind of strength in our churches, but it surely does. People need to be reminded that we are not masters of our own destiny, that Jesus is Lord, and that not a good idea to push God to one side; people need to

be reminded that there is more to life than what we eat and drink, than the thrills and pleasures of life.

Strong churches come from strong individuals with strong faith. I'm convinced that the key to this is reading and understanding the Bible. There are three ways in which we make contact with the Bible: we listen to it being read and preached in church; we read it at home for ourselves; we read and talk about it together in a small group. Most of us are happy with the first of these because that's what we do here every week. The statistics tell us that only about 10% of Christians in Scotland read the Bible regularly, so most of us seem not to be comfortable with the second of these; and the third, our small group, is a minority interest, albeit a very stimulating one. I came across the notion of "rhythms of grace", habits that we can create that will lead us closer to God, ways of reading the Bible and praying that will deepen and strengthen our faith; there are lots of these and I can help you find one that suits you, if you want to come and talk to me about it. It matters so much more than we know.

2016 will be a year when we spend a lot of time talking and thinking about our buildings. We will say more about that in a few weeks time. The big challenge for us will be to spend time building people up in our faith, alongside the building project, remembering that the strong church is all about people growing in our faith together. I was taken when I read these words of M'Cheyne: "We shall pray over the same promises, mourn over the same confessions, praise God in the same songs, and be nourished by same words of eternal life" and they would have things to talk about when they meet. That would be a great start: to read the Bible and talk, in our conversations, about what we read, people talking about important issues, about values, about faith, about God. I'm curious about my faith; I want to know more about it, about what bible teaches me, about what Jesus is like and what Jesus has done and how I can be a better friend to Jesus and a better friend to you and to the people I meet on street. Do you share that curiosity? Satisfying that curiosity is the first step to growing our faith!

The Lord stirred Cyrus' heart; the Lord stirred the hearts of 43,000 people to travel to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple; the Lord stirred the hearts of their friends and neighbours to give them what they needed to do the work. In what ways will the Lord stir your heart today to make a new beginning? Or in 2016 generally? But are we listening? Will we respond? The Lord stirred the heart of one woman to come to church last year wondering if church suited her; my prayer for her is that the Lord stirs her heart again and that she has courage to come again to find the answer to her question. Only the Lord can stir the hearts of people, our hearts, others' hearts, to believe, to come to church, to live life in Jesus' ways. Listen as the Lord stirs! Pray for Lord to stir the hearts of many in 2016!