

# The Book of the Prophet Ezekiel



## Bible Notes July-September 2006

50p

### July 1<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 1 vv 1-3

The Book of Ezekiel is probably one of the less well-known books of the Old Testament. It contains some weird images and some amazing stories. I am not sure how far some of them are to be taken literally. A prophet is a messenger of God. God gives the word, the message, and the prophet's task is to express that word to the people. He may do this orally, in writing or by the use of signs and symbols, but the point is to convey God's Word to individuals, to the community of God's people and to the world at large. This is what the preacher is trying to do in the modern world and, just like the prophets of Israel, he cannot do his work without the Spirit of God. Like them, he will often meet resistance and opposition. So preachers need to be supported in prayer. Preachers and hearers alike need to pray for grace to discern God's Word in the words uttered, the visual aids etc.

### July 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel 1 vv 1-3

We need to put Ezekiel in his historical context. God is the God of history. He is eternally, but He acts in time and space. He cares for individuals and nations and His guiding hand is behind whatever happens. Part of the preacher's role is to discern and point to the signs of the times.

God had delivered Israel from Egyptian slavery by Moses. Under Joshua they had settled in the Promised Land. There their history was mixed. When they followed God's commandments, things went well. (After all, the world is God's creation. Obeying His Law means following the Maker's instructions. We are made in God's image. When we keep His commandments, we are being true to our essential nature.) When they prospered, however, they forgot about God, worshipped gods made of silver and gold, became greedy and selfish, lawless, blood-thirsty, dishonest and oppressive. When this happened, things went wrong. When things went wrong, they repented and the cycle went round again.

Except that eventually God had enough of them and the Babylonians conquered their land, destroyed the Temple and the holy city and compelled many of them to live in exile. It is in this context that Ezekiel speaks the Word of God to them. We could possibly summarise his message as: You have polluted yourselves by your wickedness in forsaking God and ill-treating your neighbour. You are in exile through your own fault. You are not fit to live in the holy land. However, God has not forgotten you. He will make you holy again. He will bring you home again. It will be up to you, then, to walk worthy of your vocation as God's people.

### July 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 1 vv 1 vv 4-28

*My Lord and my God.*

Today is St Thomas's Day. On the Sunday after Easter, Thomas was granted his wish to see Jesus and given the opportunity to touch the wounds of His Crucifixion. Thomas' response, *My Lord and my God*. Jesus, crucified and risen, was Thomas' vision of God. Quite a contrast with Ezekiel's. Amidst all the wonder and mystery of the living creatures, the chariot, the throne and the rainbow, Ezekiel speaks of *the likeness as the appearance of a man*. Mysterious, concealed in glory or a crucified man? Both are valid visions of God which enable us to glimpse something of His true nature, which is so far beyond our comprehension. We need both – the awesome, immense, indefinable mystery, and Jesus our friend and brother. We need both but dare I suggest that we need to start with the awe – the *mysterium tremens and fascinans*\*,? Otherwise we don't realise just how incredible the story of Jesus really is.

### July 4<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 2 vv 1-5

*And they, whether they will hear, or whether they will forbear, (for they are a rebellious house,) yet shall they know that there hath been a prophet among them.*

How do we measure success? A successful business makes a good profit. A successful event attracts a good crowd. Successful pop stars or film stars have plenty of fans. A successful politician attracts votes. In their own terms, these may indeed be the way to judge businesses, entertainment and politics, although I am not entirely happy even about this. I could not commend a business which made a lot of money by exploiting its workers, polluting the planet or swindling its customers. I don't think some popular entertainments are anything to be proud of. Hitler seemed pretty popular at the Nuremberg Rallies.

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\* a frightening and fascinating mystery.

Anyway, popularity is not the way to judge a preacher or prophet. What matters is that he honestly speaks the Word of God, whether they will hear or whether they will forbear.

July 5<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 2 vv 6&7

We should remember, and remember in our prayers, those who live in places where they are persecuted for their faith. There are plenty of countries in the world today where atheist governments or governments of non-Christian religions, or militant followers of other religions oppose the Church, make it tough to live the Christian life and threaten those who try to share their faith with others. Even in this country, people can find themselves mocked or thought odd because they are Christians. There is huge pressure to conform to the norms of the world outside the Church.

We pray for people under these pressures and we need to examine ourselves to see whether we give in to them and live worldly rather than Christian lives.

Ezekiel, however, is warned to expect opposition from his own people, God's people, the community of faith. Old Israel only too easily absorbed the norms of the secular world, the pagan nations around it. The Church is the new Israel and it has always been open to the seductions of the world. The Church becomes worldly and fiercely opposes the preachers God sends to recall her to holiness.

July 6<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 2 vv 9&10

*Joy in the Lord Shall Be Your Strength.*

I was watching *Have I Got News For You?* last night. One of the questions was about a comic video made by soldiers serving in Iraq. Ian Hislop commented that it was amazing that people doing one of the worst jobs in the world were laughing. But it was the laughter, of course, that kept them going. That is the human spirit, to laugh in the face of adversity. The Christian equivalent is that transcending joy which informs our attitude to all life's experiences, good and bad.

I say that because many people see Christianity as more about *lamentations, mourning, and woe*, as in this verse. There certainly is a lot of woe if people defy the Law of God. Lamentation has its proper place in personal repentance and in sympathy for the sorrows of others. But lamentations, mourning and woe are not the essence of faith. Jesus came that we might have joy in all its fullness.

July 7<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 1-3

*The law of the Lord is an undefiled law, converting the soul: the testimony of the Lord is sure, and giveth wisdom unto the simple.*

*The statutes of the Lord are right, and rejoice the heart: the commandment of the Lord is pure, and giveth light unto the eyes.*

*The fear of the Lord is clean and endureth for ever: the judgements of the Lord are true, and righteous altogether.*

*More to be desired are they than gold, yea, than much fine gold: sweeter also than honey, and the honey-comb.*

*Moreover, by them is thy servant taught: and in keeping of them there is great reward.*

*Let the words of my mouth, and the meditation of my heart: be alway acceptable in thy sight,  
O Lord: my strength and my redeemer.*

Psalm 19

July 8<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 4-7

Ezekiel is living with the exiles in Babylon. The Babylonians had their own language and their own religion. Surely, it would be harder to preach God's Word to the Babylonians than to Ezekiel's fellow Israelites.

God says it would actually be easier to convince the Babylonians. After all, Christianity is growing fast in many previously pagan places, for example in Africa, whereas, in so-called Christian countries like ours, it seems to be declining. In England people think they know all about Christianity. Either they think they know enough to reject it outright, or they have tamed it, compromised the faith and accommodated Christ's commandments to the exigencies of daily life, to the extent that they are unwilling or unable to hear afresh just what a challenge Jesus presents. Thousands of people like me read the Scriptures and proclaim the word in churches every week and it is water off a duck's back. And there's not much response to mission outside of church buildings either. Pray for all us Christians to be effective in proclaiming God's Word to England.

#### July 9<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 8&9

The preacher needs to be strong, whether preaching at home or abroad. He must not be deflected by persecution from outside the Church, opposition within the Church or that all-crushing indifference with which an apathetic audience so often resists the Word of God. That strength can only come from God and that is why we must support our preachers and pray for them, not only missionaries and evangelists sharing the faith with non-believers, but also those who are called to tear down or build up the Church through their preaching.

#### July 10<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 10&11

How did the ancient prophets receive the Word of God? They speak as if God has given them the exact words to say. One clue is the prophetic vision. We had an account of one of Ezekiel's visions in chapter 1. Other prophets, too, seem to have had visions – either inaugural visions to start them on their ministry, or visions at particular times when they needed encouragement or guidance. They would have experienced speaking to God in prayer and different manifestations of the Holy Spirit. No doubt God also used what they already knew from the Law and the message of other prophets and their own personal experience of life.

We have Jesus. We have the Bible and 2,000 years of Christian teaching. We have our experiences of the world, our own prayer life and our own experience of God. Preacher and listener are trying prayerfully together to discern the Word of God through the sermon. They will use all those resources.

Adding a note, let me say how important it is to see the sermon as an opportunity to participate in God's Word. I must always regard that way every opportunity to preach. When we are the listeners, we need to approach the sermon with that same attitude if we are to get out of it what God is offering us.

#### July 11<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 12-15

This is one of those places where I wonder whether Ezekiel is talking about a literal experience or a vision. Anyway, God has placed him among the exiles. The key verse for this meditation is *I sat where they sat*. You can only really help people if you understand them. You need to get among them, to share their experience, to sympathise with them, to become one with them. That way you can bring the Word of God to them. *The Word became flesh and dwelt among us*.

Now argue with me. Tell me about the value of itinerant ministry. Remind me of Wesley or St Paul. But does St Paul say, *I am made all things to all men, that I might by all means save some*. (cf 1 Corinthians 9 vv 19-23). Is the Rector part of the congregation or is he apart from it, its leader and/or servant?

#### July 12<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 16-19

It's quite a responsibility that God gives to His preachers and, by extension, to the whole Church. We have a message to deliver. That message is a matter of life and death to the intended recipients. If we tell them and they don't listen, it's their responsibility. But if we don't give them the message and they perish, it's our fault. Sharing our faith isn't a matter of recruiting more members to shore up our failing churches. It is a matter of life and death for them to hear and believe.

#### July 13<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 3 vv 20&21

Ezekiel is very much the prophet of individual responsibility. People shouldn't be blamed for the actions of the family they come from or the tribe or race they belong to. They are responsible for their own actions and are to be punished or rewarded accordingly. In the same way, we are not to blame our parents or our environment for the kind of people we are. These things may explain why we are like we are. People might be less harsh on us because of our tough background. But, when all is said and done, it is up to us to move on. Bad people can reform. Good people can go wrong. It is up to the Church to encourage the former and inhibit the latter.

#### July 14<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 3 vv 22-27

Ezekiel not only spoke the word, he enacted it. Obviously, our whole lives as God-fearing people, are signs of the Kingdom. Specifically, however, Ezekiel performed actions which were visual aids to bring home the message. But they were more than visual aids. God's Word is not mere words. God *said*, Let there be light and there was light. God's Word not only proclaims what God is doing. God's Word effects what it proclaims. So Ezekiel's actions not only illustrate what God is doing to Israel. They are part of the carrying out of the divine plan. What does this sign mean? Because they wouldn't listen, for a time at least, they wouldn't have the opportunity to hear. Just as they were confined in exile, Ezekiel would be confined in his house. God's Word would be confined with him until God's time when His Word would burst forth with words of judgement and of restoration.

#### July 15<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 4 vv 1-3

This is a straightforward visual aid, illustrating the siege and fall of Jerusalem. Nebuchadnezzar actually conquered Jerusalem twice. The first time he plundered the temple and took the king and a large number of other people into exile. He appointed the king's uncle as the new king. Ten years later, following a rebellion by the Jerusalemites, he returned, executed the puppet king, burnt the temple and demolished the city walls, taking more people into exile.

So far, we have been dealing with events between the two capitulations. Ezekiel is obviously prophesying the second here. It was important that Israel should understand that this would happen. Some people thought that only those who remained in Jerusalem were the true Israel. Some people no doubt hoped that, with the help of God, old Jerusalem would rise again. The prophets' message is clear. For the time being, the future was in Babylon. Those in exile held the key to restoration and restoration wasn't going to happen yet. The old had to be completely purged away.

#### July 16<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 4 vv 4-8

The Israelites were notionally one nation, descended from Jacob, led out of Egypt by Moses and established as a united kingdom by David. In fact, of course, they were twelve tribes and, after the reign of Solomon, they split into two kingdoms which were known as Israel (the northern kingdom) and Judah. Judah had Jerusalem as its capital. It had the temple and the descendant of David on the throne. Israel was semi-detached. Its cult was less orthodox and its government more unstable. The capital of the northern kingdom was Samaria and that had fallen to the Assyrians more than a century before Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians. The Assyrians had also deported the population of northern Israel. Ezekiel foresees a long exile, but ultimate restoration both for Israel and Judah. The exile of Israel is longer than that of Judah.

#### July 17<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 4 vv 9-17

Although in Babylon, Ezekiel is to eat the diet of a besieged city as a sign of the hardships that the people of Jerusalem would undergo. Is there also here a solidarity with them? Man does not, however, live by bread alone. There are more important things than food. They are not only undergoing the physical hardships of siege warfare. They have lost their dignity. They face defeat. They are to lose their homes and their temple and to be compelled to live in a foreign land, a land they think of as unclean. When there is no coal or wood, people use dung to fuel their cooking fires. The ultimate indignity would be to have to use human dung for this purpose. That would be a sign of utter degradation, but at least God spares him this.

#### July 19<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 5 vv 1-4

Siege warfare is a terrible thing. There are too many ways to die. Not only is there the danger of being killed by the enemy. There is also famine. There will be disease. When civilisation collapses under the

pressure of war, there may even be wild animals killing and eating the weakened fugitives. Those who survive may be forced to leave their country and possessions. Ezekiel's hair is destroyed in three different ways, total destruction.

It makes us stop and think about the wars going on in the world today and how terrible warfare is. What can we do to encourage peace? How can we help those injured or bereaved by war, those who have lost their homes and livelihoods, refugees, people today suffering famine or plague because of the disruptions caused by war? What can we do?

July 20<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 5 vv 5-17

Israel was supposed to be different. When God brought them out of Egypt, He took them to the holy mountain, Mount Sinai. There they were consecrated as a holy nation, a royal priesthood. They received God's Law. They were to be His people and He would be their God. They would be a shining light in contrast to the depravity of the surrounding nations, with their idolatry, lust, bloodshed etc, etc. They would be a holy nation living in a holy land with a holy temple in which the holy God could be thought to dwell. In fact, they have turned out to be as bad as the pagans and with less excuse, because they knew the Law. So they will lose the holy temple and the holy city and they will no longer live in the holy land. The prophet's message is that they have brought it on themselves.

In the New Testament, the Christian Church inherits the status of a holy nation, a royal priesthood. We are not called merely to be no worse than other people. We are to be transformed into the likeness of Christ. And, when we do sin, we have less excuse than other people, not more.

July 21<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 6 vv 1-7

As we've said, the story of the Old Testament is in many ways the story of the struggle to get the Israelites to live up to their vocation to be the people of God. The Christian Church has the same problem. One way of keeping the people pure was to ensure that there was discipline in the worship. People couldn't do just as they pleased. They couldn't copy their pagan neighbours or mix features of pagan religion with their own religious practices. Preachers and priests needed to be recognised and authorised. For this reason, the many shrines on hills and in sacred groves etc, scattered around the land of Israel, were outlawed. People were to come to the temple in Jerusalem for their festivals. There their sacrifices would then be guaranteed to be offered according to Law and the Law would be proclaimed as the basis of all behaviour. A trained priesthood would make sure things were done properly! This is why Ezekiel prophesies destruction to the hill and tree sanctuaries where people worshipped other gods or worshipped the LORD without a proper attention to Torah.

The Church still has rules as to who may preach or conduct worship and how that worship is to be performed. These rules are meant to prevent disorder and error. They can also inhibit freedom, however, and, if the religious authority has become sclerotic or corrupt, they may need to be challenged. It is an interesting and important question – if and when we should challenge authority.

July 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel 6 vv 8-10

One of the prophetic themes is that a remnant would be saved. There are various emphases. One is that it is ONLY a remnant. The disaster is so complete. Here, the idea seems to be that there must be some left to understand what has happened and to acknowledge God. Later, the idea of a remnant becomes much more positive. The remnant becomes the future of Israel. The remnant becomes the Christian Church.

Notice the language used of Israel's infidelity. Our relationship to God is like a marriage. Infidelity to God is like adultery in a marriage.

July 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 6 vv 11-14

I am the LORD. Written in capitals like that, the English "LORD" stands for the Hebrew YHWH. It comes from the verb "to be". God is the One Who is. This is the Name God gives to Moses when he asks His Name at the burning bush. God does His mighty works for His Name's sake. The priestly blessing is described as putting God's Name on the children of Israel. "I am the LORD" is the basis of God's

commandments and the reason why Israel must obey them. In other words *I am the Lord* is the very basis of God's covenant relationship with Israel. It is a mark of how bad things have got, how far they have drifted away from God, that now they will not know that He is the LORD because they are blessed, but because of the severity of the punishment. They will nevertheless know that He is the LORD. You can't just walk away from God.

#### July 24<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 7 vv 1-27

Comprehensive doom. All the horrors of warfare. Then conquering heathens in their homes and in the holy places. Then deportation. All this happening because they have defiled the holy nation by their unholy behaviour.

#### July 25<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 8 vv 1-18

Ezekiel is in Babylon. He is transported back to Jerusalem. Are we to think of a miraculous journey? Does God give him a vision of what is going on in Jerusalem? Is this Ezekiel's graphic way of describing what he has been told by messengers from the holy city. Whatever, the point is that those left behind in Jerusalem are using the temple for various pagan cults – Canaanite, Egyptian and Babylonian. They have thus defiled God's Temple and made it an unfit place for Him to dwell.

What does this say about our relationship with other faiths? It must be right to respect believers in other religions, to listen to them courteously and certainly not to persecute them, but there are lines to be drawn. Some practices, even some beliefs, are unacceptable and there is a limit to compromise. Can I think of any contemporary examples? Female circumcision is highly regarded in some cultures, but it is definitely wrong in an absolute sense, not a legitimate expression of cultural diversity. Not too long ago, the torso of a young boy was found in London, thought to have been killed in a religious ritual. Young women have been beaten up or killed because they have refused to take part in arranged marriages. A little girl was nearly drowned recently in London because people thought she was a witch. Some people's beliefs are vile and we are under no obligation to tolerate them.

#### July 26<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 9 vv 1-11

There was to be a distinction between those who went along with the abominations and those who deplored them. The righteous were to be marked out for salvation. There is a choice even if it is not always easy to stand out against other people. You may be thinking of Revelation 7 where God seals the saints to keep them safe through the coming wrath and Revelation 13 where people are forced to accept the mark of the beast in order to fit in as part of normal society. In Revelation 20 it is those who have not received the mark of the beast who share Christ's 1,000 year reign.

#### July 27<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 10 vv 1-22

This is the same God that Ezekiel saw in his first vision beside the River Chebar. The point is that God is leaving the holy city because of the pollution caused by idolatry and sin. Coals from the altar are scattered on the city. Maybe this symbolises the destruction of the city, though you will remember that, when Isaiah has his vision of God, a coal from the altar purifies him so that he is no longer a man of unclean lips, but a prophet to the people. So maybe the coals from the altar purify the city. Perhaps purification and destruction go together. Gold from the refiner's fire. The dross is burnt or discarded.

#### July 28<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 1-4

*It is not near.*

Certain prominent individuals have been encouraging complacency. They think the disaster isn't coming or at least not yet. Eat, drink and be merry. Now, we're used to doom-mongers. Religious doom-mongers have been telling us that the end is nigh for years. During the Cold War, we were told to expect nuclear annihilation. Now we are entertained with the terrorist threat and warnings about global warming. So are we complacent or ought we to panic? Sometimes the doom-mongers get it right. It is a question of discerning the times. Don't study the news with your head in the sand and don't look at every threat through a magnifying glass. Make a sober assessment in the light of the Scriptures and don't panic. Hopefully, we're all among those who have received God's seal.

July 29<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 5-13

It doesn't do to be complacent in wrongdoing. Wrongdoing brings its own reward. It's the way things are. Given that we live in a Universe constructed by a God Who is love, if we don't live by His Law of Love, cracks start appear and our world falls apart.

July 30<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 14-16

Those left in Jerusalem thought they were the favoured ones. Primitive belief held that different gods had dominion in different lands. You couldn't worship God except in God's land. When Naaman decided to worship the God of Israel at home in Syria, he made his poor mules carry a couple of loads of Israelite soil on which he could worship Yahweh in Damascus. Those left in Jerusalem thought, therefore, that they were closer to God than those in exile. Ezekiel tells them that it is the other way round. Because the exiles are more righteous, God is closer to them. He doesn't need a temple to dwell in, a place where people can worship. He Himself will be a sanctuary where the exiles are. God is always with us and we can pray to Him absolutely anywhere.

July 31<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 17-21

Old Testament Interpretation: The Jews who do not live in the holy land are known as the Diaspora. Jews in Britain still think of themselves as part of the Diaspora. Even in Ezekiel's day, there were plenty of Jews who lived in places other than Israel, quite apart from the Babylonian Captivity. God promises to gather together and bring them back to the holy land. They will cleanse the land of its abominations and God will cleanse them, giving them a new heart and a new spirit, but they have to be willing to keep His Law.

August 1<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 17-21

New Testament Interpretation: God's people – Jews and gentiles, everybody who believes in Jesus – are scattered in a diaspora throughout the world. God gives them a new spirit, His Holy Spirit, and a new heart, the dwelling place of Jesus. He gathers them into one, holy, catholic and apostolic Church and, one day, He'll gather them into one in Heaven. Nevertheless, it is up to them to repent and to stay away from the sins that defile.

August 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel 11 vv 22-25

The future lies with the exiles. The vision symbolises God's presence moving to Babylon. The exiles have the prophet Ezekiel. It would be wrong, however, to think that God no longer loves those left in Jerusalem. They have the prophet Jeremiah. Jeremiah, too, knows that the hope for the future is with the exiles. Nevertheless, Jeremiah remains with the people in Jerusalem, sharing their sufferings, suffering their hostility to him, and eventually sharing exile with a bunch of fugitives who run away to Egypt.

In worldly terms, we support the strong. We close unprofitable branches. We withdraw treatment from those whose quality of life we deem to be poor. We shoot lame horses. God cares about the weak and the strong. He is with those who obviously have a future and those who apparently have none. God doesn't give up on anyone. He loves everybody. He sometimes surprises us by bringing strength out of weakness and *vice versa*. After all, in human terms, those left in Jerusalem probably looked most likely to rebuild the temple, but it was the exiles' returning grandchildren who actually did it! We have to be careful not to write off people, any people at all, how ever poor, old, sick, even criminal they might be. We also have to guard against judging churches and Christian work by the same criteria we might use to evaluate businesses and estimate potential for growth and investment.

August 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 12 vv 1-28

We have here quite a recap of what has gone before. Ezekiel acts out fleeing from an invading army. He acts out becoming an exile. Maybe people will take more notice if they see a demonstration than if they merely hear him speak? We are reminded of the horrors of war. Not only Jerusalem, but the surrounding towns and villages suffer. The fields are laid waste. The young men are at war, not farming. Armies plunder what there is. Crops are deliberately destroyed to prevent the enemy from benefiting from them. No wonder there is famine and disease. And the people still can't discern the times. I shouldn't have



thought it required Ezekiel's supernatural insight. Nebuchadnezzar is intent on establishing an empire. He has an incredibly powerful army. He has conquered Judah, removed the rightful king (Jehoiachin) and put the king's uncle on the throne as a Babylonian vassal. This vassal (Zedekiah) weak and foolish, under the influence of powerful but stupid courtiers, launches a rebellion. What did people think was going to happen?

August 4<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 13 vv 1-16

In the 1970s I was taught by a clergyman who had been a curate before the war. In the 1930s, he told people that war was coming. This may have been spiritual insight. It may have been simple human wisdom. He came from a Jewish family, several of whom died under the Nazis. When he prophesied war, they refused to listen. Then, in the depths of the war, he preached that one day peace would return and the ruins would be rebuilt. They wouldn't believe that either. People are amazingly blind to what God is telling them. They are blind to good sense, which is the same thing really. We tend to imagine that preachers should be popular. What matters is not whether they are popular, but whether they are honestly speaking the Word of God. The evidence from the Bible suggests that it is the authentic preachers who often find it hardest to get a hearing. Yet it is only the authentic message that can heal. By and large, people did not receive Jesus. They crucified Him. But to those who did receive Him He gave power to become children of God.

August 5<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 13 vv 17-23

What seems to be going on here is some kind of witchcraft or magic. The difference between magic and prayer is that magic seeks to use spiritual or psychic power to control events or people in the world whereas prayer seeks the will of God so that we may work with Him in body, mind and spirit. Magic seeks to control, often for selfish reasons. Prayer relies on the fact that God is in control.

These women were making a profit by giving people what they wanted. The Church offers people what they need, whether they want it or not.

August 6<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 14 vv 1-6

Why couldn't people discern the signs of the times? Why couldn't they receive the LORD's word? The answer is that they were idolaters. May it not be that people in our society cannot receive God's Word because they are idolaters? What you worship is what you live your life for. An idol is a false god. False gods don't have to be graven images. Our god is what we live for – career, money, an obsessive hobby, relationships, self. If, in effect, if we live our lives for things like that, we may be blinded to what God is saying to us. Indeed we might not want to know what God is saying to us. A very trivial example is that He might tell us that it is more important to come to Church on a Sunday than to go out for the day or to catch up on our work. If that is a trivial example, maybe you can think of some more important ones.

August 7<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 14 vv 7-11

Those who are not sincere worshippers of the LORD but are effectively hypocrites in that they pretend to be seeking His Word, perhaps deceiving themselves as well as other people, will receive false prophecies. They will hear what they want to hear, but it won't do them any good. The prophets who go along with these hypocrites will themselves be deceived. It is the LORD Who is deceiving them, but they have brought it on themselves by seeking to please men rather than God. So the false prophets will share the judgement that falls on the people who are willingly deceived by their false prophecies.

August 8<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 14 vv 12-23

This reminds us of Genesis 18 vv 16-33 where Abraham discusses the destruction of Sodom and Gomorrah with God. Maybe, the inhabitants are predominantly wicked, but surely not all of them. Will God destroy the good with the wicked? What about the prayers of the righteous. Might they not save the wicked cities from destruction? The atom bombs on Hiroshima and Nagasaki were dropped on 6<sup>th</sup> & 9<sup>th</sup> August 1945. Despite the war crimes committed by the Japanese, surely all the people in those cities didn't deserve that fate. At least one of those who died in Nagasaki was a British POW. If we hadn't bombed those cities, though, because some of the people there weren't our enemies, maybe the war would have continued much longer with far more loss of life, on our side as well as theirs. Should the wicked city escape because there

are a few righteous people in it? What about those who have received God's seal? If we are individually responsible, why should we suffer for other people's misdeeds or benefit from their virtues? In this life, there is a good deal of unfairness and injustice. As Christians, we can only hope that it is sorted out in the next.

#### August 9<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 15 vv 1-8

The vine is highly thought of in Mediterranean countries. *God giveth the wine to make glad the heart of man.* The vine or vineyard was often used as an image for Israel, a nation planted by God, intended to be fruitful. In Psalm 80, the psalmist protests that God has allowed His vine or vineyard to be destroyed. In Isaiah 5, the prophet says that the vineyard has been thrown open to destruction because it is unfruitful. Jesus says the vineyard will be given to others because those responsible have commandeered the fruit, ill treated the Master's stewards and killed His Son. Ezekiel points out that vine wood isn't much use, especially when it is burnt. It is all a story of failure. But then comes Jesus and He tells us that He is the vine and we are the branches and the secret of bearing fruit is to abide in Him.

#### August 10<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 16 vv 1-43

The point here is that Israel owes everything to God. Their ancestors were wandering nomads and slaves. God has given them everything they have, making them prosperous in the Promised Land. In their prosperity they have forgotten the God Who gave them everything, become like the pagan nations around them, worshipping gold and silver, worshipping false gods, even sacrificing the children God gave them.

St Paul tells us to give thanks at all times. We are utterly dependent on God. Everything we have comes from Him. When we are thankful, we are joyful. We remember to acknowledge God as the source of everything we have and remember to use what we have to His glory and for the benefit of other people.

#### August 11<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 16 vv 44-59

The people of Judah thought they were better than the pagans around them. God reminds them that they are of the same race, the human race. Having God's Law, they had a tremendous privilege, but privilege brings with it responsibility. They should have behaved better than the pagans and are all the more culpable because they didn't.

Now, we can simply read this as a bit of ancient history. Or we can examine ourselves to see whether the cap fits. England has had the privilege of receiving the Word of God since St Augustine landed near Ramsgate in 597AD. The Bible is freely available in our bookshops. Churches are open every Sunday. But are we a Christian country? And what about those of us who do consider ourselves to be Christians? Does God come first in our lives? Does He come first to the extent of determining how we use our time, talents and money? Or is God just one aspect of our lives, competing with career, leisure activities and family for our attention?

#### August 12<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 16 vv 60-63

God doesn't give up on us. He takes the initiative in bringing us back to Himself. If you feel you've strayed from God, you can come back. Open yourself to Him in prayer. Come back to Church. Read the Bible. Use the means of grace He offers – Christian fellowship, Word and Sacrament etc etc. If you feel our Church has strayed away from God, pray for its return. Ditto, our nation.

It isn't surprising that Samaria (Northern Israel) is described as Judah's (Southern Israel's) elder sister destined to share in the restoration, but Ezekiel refers to Sodom as the younger sister, who will also share in the restoration. There is hope for everyone!

#### August 13<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 17 vv 1-24

This is a parable! Remember Ezekiel is writing between Nebuchadnezzar's two attacks on Jerusalem. He has conquered the city and taken King Jehoiachin with many of the citizens into exile in Babylon. He has appointed Jehoiachin's uncle, Zedekiah as his vassal in Jerusalem. Zedekiah, egged on by his courtiers, has

rebelled against Babylon, relying on the other Great Power, Egypt, to support him. Egyptian power was, however, in decline at that time and it was an inept political decision to go down that road.

There is also a theological objection to going back to Egypt. Egypt is the past. Israel is meant to have moved on from there and to stop looking back.

#### August 14<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 18 vv 1-4

That generation were blaming their parents' generation for what was happening to them. God says, no, whatever their parents had done, they were responsible for what they did. Their parents had left them a legacy, but it was up to them what they did with it.

#### August 15<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 18 vv 5-9

It's worth pausing to consider what constituted a righteous man in those days and to compare it with what we think a righteous man would be today. The first couple of items concern false religion. We wouldn't expect a Christian to worship anything other than the LORD. Neither would we expect him to be an adulterer. The next item concerns Old Testament purity laws. We can agree that a good man doesn't oppress people or keep the pledge of a poor debtor who can't repay him.\* A good man doesn't commit robbery with violence. He does give to the hungry and naked. In the Bible (as in the Koran) lending at any interest is regarded as wrong. We accept the idea of borrowing at interest. Excessive interest charges are certainly wrong, but what is excessive? In our society, the poor often have to pay much higher rates to a loan company than a richer person can get from the bank! We would certainly support those who refrain from doing wrong and are fair in their dealings.

#### August 16<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 18 vv 10-18

We're back to individual responsibility. If a bad son rebels against all that his good father has taught him, he will have to take responsibility for what he does. His father's virtue won't save him. Equally, if the son of a bad man realises the consequences of living a wicked life, and lives a good life, he won't suffer for his father's wrong-doing.

Obviously, a good upbringing is a good start in life and it is hard to rise above a bad upbringing. I think that is what is meant by the sins of the fathers being visited on the children. We are not, however, judged on the cards we are dealt, but by what we do with them.

#### August 17<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 18 vv 19-32

*Have I any pleasure at all that the wicked should die? saith the Lord GOD\*\*.*

God definitely does not want the destruction of the wicked. He wants them to repent and live. The innocent need defending. Justice demands the possibility of punishment. A just God can't just turn a blind eye. But He doesn't desire the death of a sinner. We see how far He is prepared to go to bring a sinner back in the death of Jesus.

#### August 18<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 19 vv 1-14

These were dangerous times. Josiah had been one of the few good kings of Judah. He died in battle at Megiddo with the Egyptians. He had three sons, Jehoahaz, Jehoiakim and Zedekiah. The people chose Jehoahaz to succeed his father, but, after three months, Pharaoh removed him into captivity in Egypt and made his brother Jehoiakim king. The Babylonians replaced Egypt as the dominant power and Jehoiakim found himself at war with Nebuchadnezzar. He died just before the fall of Jerusalem and was succeeded by his son Jehoiachin. Jehoiachin went into exile, where he was quite well treated. Uncle Zedekiah became king and rebelled against Babylon. Nebuchadnezzar then destroyed Jerusalem, killed Zedekiah's sons in front of him, blinded him and took him off to exile.

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\* What about mortgage repossession?

\*\* The Name of God was considered too holy to pronounce. So where the Hebrew text says YHWH, the reader says Adonai, which means "Lord". English bibles conventionally write this as LORD. Ezekiel quite often refers to the Lord YHWH, which would sound silly as the Lord LORD• . So the English bible writes the Lord GOD.

All this mess is a consequence of human wickedness: wars of conquest, rebellion against God, fighting, betrayal, rebellion. Behind it all, Ezekiel sees the Hand of God. Despite all the horrors consequent on our abuse of the freedom God gives us, He is guiding history towards its final consummation in the Kingdom of God.

#### August 19<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 20 vv 1-32

*We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone.*

The elders wanted a message from God. Ezekiel reminded them of the history of Israel. They were unfaithful to God when they were slaves in Egypt. God set them free and they were unfaithful in the Wilderness. God brought them into the Promised Land and they were unfaithful there as well. The story is of a loving, generous God and a faithless people. This generation, says the prophet, is no different. Their attitude is *We will be as the heathen, as the families of the countries, to serve wood and stone*. Could it be that we find it difficult to discern the Word of God, because we are too much like the secular world?

#### August 20<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 20 vv 33-44

People talk about cheap grace. Now the very word “grace” means something that is free. So how can grace be cheap, or expensive, come to that? The answer is that grace is not valueless, but priceless. Ultimately, it cost the life of the Son of God. When people talk about cheap grace, I think they mean our tendency to take God for granted. We are not too fussy about the way we behave. Our repentance is perfunctory. We pray or go to Church when we feel like it. We offer our loose change as our contribution to God’s work. And we think it will all be all right, because God is a nice old boy, who will put up with anything. Ezekiel warns the Israelites here that, before they can get back into the Promised Land, God is going to bring them through a harsh wilderness. This is true geographically in that there is a lot of desert between Babylon and Jerusalem. More importantly, it is true spiritually. Lent comes before Easter. Sincere repentance comes before forgiveness. Death to sin goes hand in hand with resurrection to eternal life.

#### August 21<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 20 vv 45-49

Ezekiel is in Babylon. The land to the south whose utter destruction he foresees is Israel. If only they would listen to the warnings before it is too late. He speaks in parables, but what is a parable? We tend to think that a parable is a story told to make the message simple. But it isn’t really. A parable does convey a message, but that message is opaque to those who are spiritually blind (cf Mark 4 v11). Parables, like the Word of God in general, point the way to those who have eyes to see and ears to hear, but to those who resolutely remain on the outside, they are simply a statement of judgement. Jesus is God’s Word made flesh. Those who receive Him become children of God with the gift of eternal life, but those who reject the Incarnate Word condemn themselves (John 3 v18). Ezekiel is greatly distressed that his hearers are unable to discern the meaning of God’s Word revealed through the prophet in parables. Many preachers feel the same!

#### August 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel 21 vv 1-32

This is another way of saying that the situation is beyond human help. And the prophet does acknowledge that in the total destruction of a defeated city, the righteous will suffer along with the wicked.

At the time of prophesying, several small nations had formed an alliance against the Babylonians. This coalition was led by Judah and Ammon.\* The prophet is saying that the coalition will come to nothing. Nebuchadnezzar is deciding which to destroy first – Ammon or Jerusalem. But, either way, the final result will be the same. Don’t trust in human solutions to the world’s problems. Trust in God.

#### August 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 22 vv 1-12

We are used to the idea that religion is a private matter. People can belong to whatever religion they like and we mustn’t criticise them for it. Faith is in heart and home. All that we insist on is that, in the community outside, everybody lives by the norms and values that all reasonable people accept. This is the basis of our multicultural society.

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\* The old Ammonite capital is now called Amman and it is the capital of Jordan in the mountains to the East of Israel.

There are a number of difficulties here.

1. It isn't true to say that all reasonable people accept the same values. In our society, there are very different schools of thought about abortion, stem cell research, the rights and wrongs of war and many other issues. There are different views on homosexuality, race and the place of women. On a number of these issues, public opinion seems to have changed over a very few decades. It is not sufficient to say that the majority, the government or our self-styled opinion formers are right and everybody else is simply wrong.
2. We are not content to allow people to practise their cultural norms in the home if those norms include wife-beating, female circumcision etc.
3. Most religions are not content with telling us how to behave indoors. Most religions tell their followers how to conduct themselves in their social and business lives and several religions (including Christianity) seek to influence the way their countries are governed. Where religions' social norms differ from one another or from the norms of secular society, there has to be a mechanism for deciding which should prevail or how to live with irreconcilable ideas. The threat of force or bullying by the majority is not morally valid.

Ezekiel sees clearly that the bloodshed and dishonesty on the streets of Jerusalem is inextricably mixed up with the poor state of their relationship with God.

#### August 24<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 22 vv 13-22

What's left in Jerusalem under Zedekiah has no future. The people carry on in their violent, dishonest ways and their society is doomed. Don't you wonder when you hear about terrible crimes committed on our own streets and the apparent inability of our authorities to do anything about it? I think the basic problem is that we have lost confidence that there are basic moral absolutes which we are duty-bound to teach to our children and which we have both a right and a duty to enforce at every level of society.

#### August 25<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 22 vv 23-31

Everyone, it seems is guilty, from the people of the land to the princes. I want to concentrate especially here, however, on the role of the prophets and the priests. The prophets have told people what they wanted to hear instead of the truth. Is that something our official spokesmen do? Is that something ministers of religion do?

The priests have violated the law in not carrying out the worship properly. In Christianity, it is not that there is a separate caste of priests, responsible for worship. All Christians constitute a royal priesthood charged with offering praise to God (1 Peter 2 v9). If I ask whether our troubles as a nation and a church might arise from our casual attitude to worship, I am not making a statement about styles of worship. The point about worship is that it is offered *in spirit and in truth*. Authentic worship can be formal or informal, modern or traditional. However many people are there, whether it is led by a rock group or an organ, a magnificently robed priest or a guy in an open-necked shirt it will not be authentic worship unless it is offered *in spirit and in truth*. I wonder whether our troubles as a Church can be put down to a "take it or leave attitude" towards taking part in worship and, when we do take part in public worship, an excessive concern that what is offered should be what we like, rather than trying to find out what God likes. Ministers can be too casual, too egotistical and self-serving. So can congregations.

#### August 26<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 23 vv 1-49

Samaria was destroyed by the Assyrians. A century or so later, Jerusalem was destroyed by the Babylonians. Samaria and Jerusalem could be thought of as sisters – say like Scotland and Ireland, both Celtic nations. Assyria, Babylon and Egypt were the great powers of the Middle East in Old Testament times. Obviously, the smaller nations had to live with that reality. To an extent, they had to defer to them. They needed to trade with them. They often had to pay tribute to them. People living in places like Samaria and Jerusalem must have been overwhelmed by the architecture, the wealth and the mighty armies that these great empires had put together. All this was inevitable and was not necessarily wrong. The Israelites, however, had gone further and adopted some of the religious practices and cultural values of the world around them and this had led to disaster.

Here is our dilemma as the Church in the world. We need to obey the laws of the secular state. We benefit by the services it provides. We use its coinage and bank notes. Indeed we have a commitment to the world in which we live, a commitment of service and witness. We can learn from the world. Yet we have to be careful not to import the world's values into our programmes as churches. Money cannot be the ultimate determinant of what we do. We are not primarily a historic buildings preservation society, nor a religious social club, nor a business. If we compromise too much with the world's values, we shall be destroyed as a distinctively Christian Body.

August 27<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 24 vv 1-14

When you boil meat, you get a scum on the top, which you skim off before serving the stew. It appears that Jerusalem is all scum. When that is skimmed off, there is nothing left. It is all to be thrown away. Even the pot will be allowed to boil dry and spoil.

August 28<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 24 vv 15-27

When people have a public role, their family life often gets caught up with their public position. One vicar's wife described living in the vicarage as like living in a goldfish bowl. The public think they have the right to know what goes on in the homes of public people and judge their competence in their public role according to the way they run their private life. This can put huge strain on the families of such people.

Here Ezekiel's behaviour following the death of his wife becomes a sign regarding what is happening to Jerusalem. This seems cruel yet I am only too aware that the way that I, as a priest, deal with my personal affairs is scrutinised in the community and taken as either authenticating or disproving the message God sent me to proclaim.

August 29<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 25 vv 1-17

In the paper recently, there was a terrible story about a man collapsing and dying in a bus station. One passer-by tried to revive him. Another took advantage of the situation to steal his wallet. Something similar has happened here. When the mighty Babylonians knocked down the defences of Judah, neighbouring small nations, who could not otherwise have hoped to do so, took advantage of the situation and plundered the land. It was bitterness at this that provoked that terrible sentiment in Psalm 137. Ezekiel warns that people who act like this will get their comeuppance.

August 30<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 26 vv 1-21

There's a lot about Tyre. It is to the north of Israel in what is now Lebanon. The people who lived there were sea-faring peoples, traders and craftsmen. They were wealthy. They thought their capital city was impregnable. And they had become arrogant.

August 31<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 27 vv 1-36

Tyre was very much in Ezekiel's mind. Years before, the Tyreans had been allies of Israel, assisting with the building of the Temple. Jezebel, who married King Ahab, was the daughter of a Tyrean king. Maybe that's where things started to go wrong.

Anyway, Ezekiel gives a fascinating and beautiful account of the prosperity of Tyre and its amazing network of trading partners. None of this will save it, however. What matters is not wealth, but virtue, worth remembering for us citizens of the fourth biggest economy in the world!

September 1<sup>st</sup>

Ezekiel 28 vv 1-26

Tyre and Sidon were part of the same culture. So the condemnation of the one applied equally to the other. The King of Tyre had become so conceited that he saw himself as a god, though, of course, in fact everything he had came from God.

What is wrong with seeing yourself as a god?

1. You think you can lord it over others.
2. You think you are impregnable, invincible.
3. You think you are self-sufficient. You don't believe that you need God.

Could this be what is wrong with our prosperous, powerful country? We give ourselves credit for our security and prosperity. We tend to lord it over other cultures. We think (backed by the Americans anyway) we are invincible. We don't need God. We can spend the Lord's Day shopping rather than worshipping. We might one day be in for a surprise.

#### September 2<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel chapters 29, 30, 31 & 32

If this seems too much to read in one session, read what you can, but I didn't want to write repetitive notes over several days. My most striking personal memory to do with these chapters goes back nearly 30 years to the time when I was a student at King's College, London. An Egyptian student asked me whether I thought these prophecies against Egypt were about things that were likely to happen to his country in the near future. I said, "No, they were about things that happened in the distant past." At least, however, he was taking the Bible seriously, looking for its contemporary relevance as the Word of God for us today. But how is it the Word of God for us today if it is about the events of 2,500 years ago?

The answer is that it is not what happened to Egypt in the reign of that Pharaoh that matters. It is what we can learn from it. When we are rich and powerful, we may feel that we can do as we like. We can use force and devious statecraft to attain our objectives. We can delude ourselves that because we are powerful we are right and that we are therefore acting in people's best interest when we compel them to accept our rule. But no human power lasts for ever. Power corrupts and corruption inevitably consumes the very power that spawned it. Only the Kingdom of God lasts forever.

*So be it Lord; thy throne shall never,  
Like earth's proud empires, pass away;  
Thy kingdom stands, and grows for ever,  
Till all thy creatures own thy sway.*

#### September 3<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 33 vv 1-20

I've been worried lately by poor attendances at Church. Few people means there are not enough of us to do all the jobs – like carry out the Christian Aid collection. Few people means less money in the plate and we are struggling to pay our bills as it is. What is more, it is possible to get into a cycle of decline. People come to Church, see a lot of empty seats and feel that it is not worth joining a dying organisation. The fear is that our branch of the Church will cease to exist. This may make us think that we must do everything possible to recruit more people in order to save the organisation.

This, however, is looking at things entirely the wrong way round. We exist as a Church in order to glorify God and to witness to His Love to the world. We try to bring others into the community of faith for their sake, not for ours, and to please God. We want them to share our love for Jesus because we love them, not because we hope they will help us to prop up a failing institution. Of course, a by-product of faithful witness may be a Church that grows in number\* and therefore has the people and financial resources to do God's work in the world. But it is not the main point of evangelism. A Church that devotes its energies to its own survival is missing the point and perhaps deserves to close.

#### September 4<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 33 vv 21-29

The messenger arrives with news of the prophesied calamity. The prophet still has to make the point. It is their arrogance and disobedience that has caused this and things cannot be put right unless and until they mend their ways.

#### September 5<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 33 vv 30-33

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\* It may not of course if a hard-hearted people refuse to accept the Gospel.

We are anxious about declining attendances. For most of Israel's history, there was no problem about attendance. They loved the temple worship with its magnificence, sacrifices and music. Listening to a prophet could be entertaining and you could feel quite uplifted by listening to him. But they didn't really hear the prophet. They didn't act in their daily lives as people who worshipped with *angels and archangels and all the company of heaven*. We might use entertaining preaching, good music, well-conducted services etc to get people in through the doors. But it mustn't stop there. Those present need really to be converted if they are to *worship in spirit and in truth*. And by *worship in spirit and in truth* I don't only mean what we do in Church, but the offering of our whole lives to God.

#### September 6<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 34 vv 1-10

In the ancient world, kings were thought of as shepherds of their people. They were supposed to protect them from danger and see that they were provided for. Anyone in authority might be thought to be a shepherd in this way – ministers of the crown, ministers of religion. This lot of leaders has badly let down the people, enriching themselves at the people's expense and pursuing policies which resulted in invasion, siege and devastation. Ministers of religion are called *pastors*\*. In the ordination service, the Bishop says to the aspiring priests, *Have always therefore printed in your remembrance, how great a treasure is committed to your charge. For they are the sheep of Christ, which he bought with his death, and for whom he shed his blood*. It is a terrific responsibility and we depend on the prayer and other support of those very sheep.

#### September 7<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 34 vv 11-16

Because of the deficiencies of the human shepherds, God says He will be shepherd Himself, fulfilled in the coming of Jesus as the Good Shepherd. The rest of us priests, kings, whatever, are under shepherds to Him, responsible to Him for how we do our duty.

#### September 8<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 34 vv 17-22

It isn't entirely the shepherds' responsibility. There are some pretty unruly sheep. God will sort them out too.

#### September 9<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 34 vv 23-31

The ideal king, the messiah, is of course the descendant of David who will reign in Jerusalem. He will be the shepherd of God's people. So will God Himself. The prophecies come together in Jesus Who is both God and the descendant of David.

#### September 10<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 35 vv 1-15

The inhabitants of Mount Seir were the Edomites, descendants of Israel's brother Jacob. (Petra is in Edomite territory, the name Edom meaning "red", the colour of Esau's hair and of the rocks where they dwelt.) These Edomites might have been expected to have been allies of their brother tribe, the Israelites. Instead they had rejoiced at Israel's fall and taken advantage of it. See again Psalm 137.

#### September 11<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 36 vv 1-15

The prophesied devastation has now occurred. The heathen nations have conquered the holy land. Many of the Israelites are dead, deported to Babylon or refugees in Egypt or elsewhere. The land is desolate and it is all because of the wickedness of those who lived there. Now, however, God promises there will be a time of restoration. It is never hopeless with God. Crucifixion is the harbinger of resurrection.

#### September 12<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 36 vv 16-24

*I do not this for your sakes, O house of Israel, but for mine holy name's sake.*

The message is clear. The nation has fallen because they have forsaken God and indulged in all kinds of wickedness, violence, sexual immorality, dishonesty and oppression of the vulnerable. God will restore them, not for their sake, but for His Name's sake. That sounds harsh, but it is also very comforting. None of us deserves to be saved by God, but He saves us for His Name's Sake. God's Name is His reputation, His character. It is because the LORD is the sort of God that He is that He saves us even though we don't deserve it.

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\* Latin for *shepherds*.



### September 13<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 36 vv 25-38

In the first instance, restoration means that the exiles will return from Babylon. They will rebuild the temple and the city of Jerusalem and put the land back under cultivation. They will be blessed by God as they now start to live by His Law, Torah.

Time will tell, however, that the restoration is not a complete success. They still disobey Torah. The new temple isn't up to the standard of the old one. They certainly don't succeed in restoring the splendours of the reigns of David and Solomon.

A further and deeper fulfilment of this prophecy is the coming of Jesus, the incorporation of the gentiles into the people of God and the gift of God's Holy Spirit to all believers. The final consummation of the prophecy is at the end of time, when we shall see Him as He is, knowing Him as we are known, when sin and sorrow will be banished for ever.

### September 14<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 37 vv 1-14

Is this the best known chapter of Ezekiel? It's even been set to music. Its original meaning was probably the restoration of Israel in the flesh to their earthly homes in the holy land. Later, it came to be understood as God giving His life-giving Spirit so that everyone could have eternal life in Him.

*Jesus said, I am the resurrection and the life: he that believeth in me, though he were dead, yet shall he live:  
And whosoever liveth and believeth in me shall never die.*

### September 15<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 37 vv 15-28

This acted out parable indicates that restoration will not only be for the southern kingdom, Judah, but also for the northern kingdom. They will be one nation under God. The Davidic Messiah will be their king. God promises to be with the restored nation. They will be sanctified because God's sanctuary, His dwelling place, is among them. This of course is extended by Jesus. Not only the Samaritans, but also the Gentiles are included in the everlasting covenant of peace. They are all one under the Davidic Messiah. God dwells among them and within them. The Church itself, the Body of Christ, the people of God, is the temple of the Holy Spirit. We are sanctified because we are the sanctuary, the temple of God. What a privilege and what a responsibility! What a thing to live up to! But this is our essential nature as Christians. Let's live up to our nature.

### September 16<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 38 & 39

Again rather a lot to read for one day, but these chapters do very much go together. They do not seem to be referring to historical events around the time of Ezekiel. This is an apocalyptic battle. Indeed the theme is taken up in Revelation\* 20. Whatever the prophecy refers to precisely in history, the point is the ultimate victory of God. The forces of evil make war against the people of God. Indeed goodness seems to provoke evil in evil people. Witness the crucifixion of Jesus. But the forces of goodness always and ultimately triumph through the victory of the cross.

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\* The Book of Revelation is also called the Apocalypse.

### September 17<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel chapters 40, 41 & 42

Whether you will read all these chapters depends, I suppose, on how interested you are in the details of Ezekiel's vision and how important you feel it is to complete your reading of Ezekiel. The point is that Ezekiel foresees the reconstruction of the holy city and the temple. It is the most important part of the restoration, to re-establish the worship. All the other aspects of national life, from politics to agriculture, from trade to welfare, can only succeed if they are based on worship. God must come first and everything else must be grounded in the nation's, the individual's relationship with God.

In Revelation, the reconstructed holy city is a model for Heaven, but it needs no temple to symbolise God's dwelling, because God actually dwells there – and so shall we if trust in Him.

### September 18<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 43 vv 1-9

In his earlier vision of desolation, Ezekiel had seen God leaving the Jerusalem temple because of the wickedness of the people of the land. Now he sees a vision of God's return when the returning exiles not only re-build their city with bricks and mortar, but also re-build their society on the foundation of Torah. V9 reminds them they've got to be true to the vision – as have we.

### September 19<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 43 vv 10-27

I don't know how you're getting on with Ezekiel. We've had some wonderful visions and some profound teaching. I can't help suspecting, however, that some of you are finding much of Ezekiel alien and possibly boring. Still, we learn from the unfamiliar. We pray *Blessed Lord, who hast caused all holy Scriptures to be written for our learning* and we shall be the poorer if we confine ourselves to the Prodigal Son and the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm.

This is all about purity, or holiness, the separation between what is God's and what is "common" or profane. The temple itself is a holy building, consecrated by sacrifice, set apart as sacred space from the streets of Jerusalem. This separation both effects and symbolises a separation between those who are God's people and those who are not, between good conduct and bad conduct. Those who are bad disannul the covenant even if they are Israelites. Those who are good please God even if they are gentiles (Romans 2 v10). For Ezekiel's generation the purity of the holy temple was inextricably tied up with the good conduct of the nation and of individuals. As Christians, we are not tied to sacred buildings, times or people. We are all sacred people – a royal priesthood. We are the temple. All time is sacred. Or that is how it should be. The danger is that, because we make no distinction between the sacred and the profane, instead of treating everything as sacred, we treat everything as profane. Maybe that is why holy buildings, holy days and a holy ministerial priesthood crept back into Christianity. In a nutshell, do you treat Sundays as weekdays or weekdays as Sundays, churches as ordinary buildings or all buildings as places where God dwells, Christian ministers as worthy of no particular respect or all Christian people as God's holy priests?

### September 20<sup>th</sup>

#### Ezekiel 44 vv 1-31

The holy is conserved by keeping it separate from what is not holy. Those who are not part of the covenant people are excluded altogether.\*

The Levites did things that ordinary Israelites weren't allowed to do, but they weren't allowed to do as much as the priests, who were to be very careful to maintain their own distinctiveness as holy people.

When Jesus was crucified, the veil of the Temple was torn in two. The way to the presence of God was opened to everyone – not so that God's dwelling would be profaned, but so that we might become holy.

### September 21<sup>st</sup>

#### Ezekiel 45 vv 1-8

The priesthood in Jerusalem largely lived as a separate caste, with their own houses and their own livelihood, much of it of course derived from the offerings of the people. They had fellowship together and studied together and were better able to maintain their purity than if they had lived out in the world. The dangers of course are that such people can become remote from the people they are serving, think

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\* Gentiles drawn to the God of Israel could become part of the covenant people if they accepted circumcision and undertook to live by Torah.

themselves better than ordinary people and live lives of luxury on the offerings of people much poorer than themselves.

In terms of Christian ministers, as St Paul says I think it is reasonable that we are supported by the offerings of the faithful (though not to excess) in order for us to be free to do our work as ministers. It is good for us to spend time in study and prayer and to have fellowship with other Christians and other ministers. I do feel, however, that the modern Church cuts its ministers off from ordinary people by taking up all their time on meetings, administration etc. This inhibits their witness and leaves them open to charges of naivety regarding what people do and believe in the outside world. Whether we think of ourselves or are thought of as better than other people is not for me to say.

#### September 22<sup>nd</sup>

Ezekiel 45 vv 9-25

All this holiness for the sanctuary went hand in hand with a holy nation. Laws were to be just. Violence and dishonesty were not to be permitted. Weights and measures had to be honest. Only a holy society could make holy sacrifices. Offering holy sacrifices would make society holy. It would be a virtuous circle. In the end, the only truly holy sacrifice was Jesus. The only truly holy priest was Jesus. He offered Himself to make us a holy people, consecrated to lead holy lives, not let off the consequences of our sin so that we should feel free to sin again.

#### September 23<sup>rd</sup>

Ezekiel 46 vv 1-15

Ezekiel envisages a society in which the first layman is the prince. He is not a priest. The Old Testament keeps kingship and priesthood apart, not putting too much power in one pair of hands. The prince does, however, lead the worship of the laity. Something similar was attempted in England with the Elizabethan Settlement. The monarch is Supreme Governor of the Church, but she is not ordained as a minister of the Church. The Church is governed by her laity and clergy meeting in synod under the presidency of the Queen. It is easy to see why we would believe that earthly rulers should consider themselves to be subject to the King of Kings and that they and we should see their role as dispensing His Justice. Whether this is possible or desirable in a multi-cultural society we are of course still deciding. And if not something like the Elizabethan Settlement, what sort settlement should there be. What is the link between earthly and divine government?

#### September 24<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 46 vv 16-18

There have to be limits to power. The ruler must not be able to confiscate what belongs to his subjects and give it to his family. Who sets these limits? Ezekiel's answer is God. So a king who confiscates the property of private citizens for his own personal use will answer to God for it. What if we don't believe in God? Or if we exclude God from the constitution of our country? Are there natural laws, independent of God, which govern our behaviour. National and international human rights legislation seems to assume so. But where do these laws come from? Not all cultures agree as to what constitutes universal human rights. Who enforces them? The Great Powers with the biggest armies? Such an answer invites cynicism about the universality of the claimed right and the altruism of the enforcer.\* Or is democracy the guarantor of rights? Desperate or deceived people can vote in some pretty nasty regimes, as did Germany in the 1930s. We separate Church from state because we respect individual conscience and recoil from a resurrection of anything like the Inquisition, yet we leave a void. If neither theology, nor philosophy nor democracy alone can provide a coherent moral legitimacy for government, what can? Or are we fooling ourselves? Will the guy who controls the army inevitably be the boss?

#### September 25<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 46 vv 19-24

Architectural details which you may or may not find interesting as an indication of the way people in those days believed things ought to be done in order to preserve the purity of the nation. They were desperate to do this, believing that the catastrophe of the fall of Jerusalem had been brought about by impurity on a national scale.

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\* It seems you have more chance of being saved from dictatorship if your land is rich in oil.

September 26<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 47 vv 1-12

If you've been to Israel, this vision makes a lot of sense. Jerusalem is high up above the Jordan Valley. Down from the city is barren desert all the way to the Dead Sea – where there is practically no life at all, almost the lowest place on earth, hot, arid, lifeless. Then in Ezekiel's vision, a stream of water flowing from the Temple, plants growing, giving food and medicine, fish in the Dead Sea. What a vision. The life-giving word goes forth from Jerusalem. The life-giving Holy Spirit flows out from the crucified Saviour. That perfect love which lays down its life is spread throughout the world, nourishing, healing, bringing eternal life wherever it is received.

September 27<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 47 vv 13-23

Volunteers, please, to read this lesson in Church. The borders of the holy land are defined and the fields are shared out by lot so that the richest, strongest and greediest don't get all the best bits. In all the concern for purity after the Exile, there is sometimes the impression that the non-Jew was given a hard time of it. We see here, however, that the foreigner settling in Israel was to be treated fairly along with the Jews. It is part of the Jews' duty to God that they care for the stranger living among them. Modern Israel might bear this in mind with respect to the Palestinians. We might bear it in mind with respect to gypsies, asylum seekers and immigrants. Movements of people need regulating and generosity to the stranger is not meant to provide a cloak for the terrorist, but the rules need to be fair to everyone, native, visitor and settler.

September 28<sup>th</sup>

Ezekiel 48 vv 1-35

This appears to be nuts and bolts stuff. The returning exiles have to parcel up the land. Each tribe has its allocation. Space in Jerusalem is set aside for the priests. What is left – the “profane” part – is for the royal court and the houses and businesses of ordinary people. It seems a mundane note on which to end the Book, but faith is nothing if not practical. It has to be practised in the every day world if it is to be practised at all.

September 29<sup>th</sup>

Revelation 4 vv 1-11

The last Book of our Bible is Revelation. John had a vision while in exile on the island of Patmos. Just as our dreams draw on our experience of life, so John's vision builds on what he must have already known from the Hebrew Scriptures, what we call the Old Testament. Ezekiel is one of the sources from which he drew and I thought it would be good to finish the quarter with a couple of chapters from John's vision.

Enjoy John's picture of Heaven. Wonder at it. Feel the awe. Join in the worship.

*Therefore with angels and archangels, and with all the company of heaven, we proclaim your great and glorious name, for ever praising you and saying:*

*Holy, holy, holy Lord,  
God of power and might,  
Heaven and earth are full of your glory.  
Hosanna in the highest.*

At this moment in the service, the hymn invites us:

*Ponder nothing earthly-minded,  
For with blessing in his hand,  
Christ our God to earth descendeth,  
Our full homage to demand.*

It's a matter of living up to what we say we believe. I'd like to think there won't be any empty seats at our Patronal Festival Eucharist at Cuxton!

September 30<sup>th</sup>

Revelation 21 vv 1-27

So Ezekiel's vision of Jerusalem rebuilt by the returning exiles becomes John's vision of Heaven. A perfect world. The permanent presence of God. The absence of sin and sorrow. Splendour. Glory. Open to all the peoples of the world who are made clean, made holy by the Blood of the Lamb.

*From earth's wide bounds, from ocean's farthest coast,  
Through gates of pearl streams in the countless host,  
Singing to Father, Son and Holy Ghost,*

*Alleluia! Alleluia!*