

Back to the Future- Mick Moore

Isaiah 45:1-25

This chapter is about the greatness of God the creator and controller of the whole world and everything that happens in it.

This morning we are going to concern ourselves with just one of these happenings and it concerns the emperor of the mighty armies of the Medes and the Persians (*Isaiah 45:1*) "Thus says the Lord to his anointed, to Cyrus". Cyrus was the emperor of the Medes and the Persians.

First let's put the chapter in context. It was addressed to the Jews who were in exile in Babylon, the nation of Israel, as a whole, had disobeyed God. They had not fulfilled the role for which God had called and chosen them, namely, to be a light to the gentiles. They needed to learn this afresh, God was for everyone not just for the Jews, defeat and exile was a good place to start "Therefore He brought against them the King of the Chaldeans" (*2 Chronicles 36:17*). Chaldeans was just another name for the Babylonians. They took Jerusalem and ransacked the city, they looted the temple and took the sacred vessels then they destroyed the temple, this is mentioned specifically in verse 19 "They burned the house of God". Then in verse 20 it says, "He took into exile those who had escaped sword". This defeat and particularly the destruction of the temple "the house of God" made them think it seemed as though God had deserted them. These verses from Psalm 137 give us an idea of how they felt. "By the rivers of Babylon, there we sat down and wept when we remembered Zion" (*Psalm 137:1*)

They had been defeated and were now in exile, they thought the exile would be short and God would rescue them and soon they would be back in Jerusalem, and their homeland. But they were mistaken. The exile was to be a long one, so the prophet Jeremiah wrote in a letter to them. We have it in Jeremiah 29:1-23. It pulled no punches, it told them that far from being a short exile it was going to last 70 years. So, they had better make the best of it. He told them to build houses, get married, in fact settle in and play a positive part in the community, "seek the welfare of the city" he said. A reminder to us that we are most effective, witnessing as Christians, when we are active in the community, the words "seek the welfare of the city" still apply. Some of the exiles certainly took Jeremiah's words to heart. For example, Daniel and his friends took quite important jobs (*Daniel 2:48-49*). On the other hand, some may have become totally absorbed into Babylonian ways. However, the worship of the one true God was kept alive. For example, Shadrach, Meshach, and Abednego refused to worship before the huge statue of Nebuchadnezzar even with the threat of the fiery furnace hanging over them (*Daniel 3:14*), this is just one example, there are many others which showed the worship of God persisted.

Towards the end of the exile there was a power struggle between the expanding empire of the Medes and Persians and the Babylonian empire. The Medes and Persians came out on top and took the city of Babylon. This meant of course that there was a new Emperor,

Cyrus. Perhaps many of the exiles thought life would go on as before. But the new emperor brought with him a new policy. The new policy was unusual and unexpected. Cyrus issued an edict that stated all exiles from whatever country, were free to return to their own homeland and there worship their own god. This of course included the Jews. The 70 years that Jeremiah had predicted was up. The exile had finished, the Jews were free to return to their land. In addition, Cyrus gave back the vessels and treasures that had been looted from the temple before it was destroyed so that they could be used in the new temple when it was built.

This new policy, Cyrus regarded as his. He imagined that he had thought of it. But Isaiah 45 tells us differently. It was God's plan, it had always been so, that's why Jeremiah could prophesy that the exile would last 70 years. God was using somebody who didn't worship Him or believe in Him. As it says in the chapter "I (God) equip you though you do not know me" (*Isaiah 45:5c*). The whole of Isaiah 45 is about God controlling world events, for many of the Jews this was new; God, working through godless foreigners in a foreign territory to further His purposes, no it surely can't be possible but in fact Cyrus is called, in chapter 45 "God's anointed one".

This whole business seemed unlikely that some German theologians in the nineteenth century maintained that the bible was inaccurate, and that Cyrus never issued such an edict, however a clay cylinder was discovered by archaeologists on which was written this very edict in several languages. The cylinder is known as Cyrus' cylinder, and so the bible was proved to be accurate.

So, the exile officially came to an end after 70 years with Cyrus edict, which perhaps taught the exiles that God rules the whole of creation not just the chosen people – the Jews. It is also a reminder to us that whatever happens in the world, and to us; God is in charge. We may not understand, and we may not be able to explain why things are happening, but we are not at the mercy of arbitrary events. God our maker is in control.

After 70 years of exile, we would perhaps think that everyone would jump at the chance of returning. But many had been born in Babylon. Some were too comfortable and making a long and hazardous journey and then to arrive at a broken sown city with a broken-down temple, this did not appeal.

But a returning party was organised and arrived at Jerusalem. The first thing they started work on was the temple. The rebuilding of the city had to wait. The returnees divided roughly into two groups. One group, often older people, looked back and wanted everything restored as it used to be. The second group looked back, but now they were in a new situation, it was pointless only looking back, it was important though to look forward as well. This division is illustrated in Ezra 3:12 at the consecration of the new temple foundations "And all the people shouted with a great shout when they praised the Lord... But many ... who had seen the first wept."

The rebuilding was hard often unrewarding work and the project faltered at times, enthusiasm waned and had to be reignited by the prophets such as Ezra, Haggai, and Zechariah.

The Jews suddenly and unexpectedly found themselves in a post Exilic situation and they had to answer the question – How are we to deal with this situation? We, as a church, face a post pandemic situation.

How are we to deal with it?

I think it would be wrong to draw direct parallels between the two situations. But like them we are faced with a new situation. We have developed new skills, we've had new experiences, which have demanded a different approach. The question is, how can we use these skills and experiences? We may want to look back and go back, it may be necessary to do things differently. But the objective is the same "to be effective witnesses to God, and Jesus in the power of the Holy Spirit". The leaders will have to make some very difficult decisions. We must remember to pray for them!