

The Repair Shop – Jonathan Thomas

Ezra 1, Revelation 22:1-6

Have you seen that wonderful programme 'The Repair Shop' that we saw a snippet of at the start of the service? People bring in old, treasured, but damaged possessions to experts to be repaired. There is always a fascinating story behind each object, how important it was to a particular person and maybe how it came to be in disrepair. And the experts do an amazing job, identifying the problems, tracking down parts needed for repair and then lovingly and carefully using their specialist skills to restore the object to something of its former glory and functionality.

Over the last few weeks we have been thinking about the New Normal for the people of Israel coming out of exile in Babylon and relating that to this phase in our nation's life of as we come out of the effects of COVID-19 into whatever our New Normal evolves into. I've really enjoyed getting to know better this part of the bible from these less well-read books.

The situation of the Israelites reminds me of the Repair Shop TV programme. And I'm going to use three Rs to highlight this from the Israelites period in exile drawing especially on today's passage from Ezra 1 and then see how it applies to us today.

Firstly, **recognising** brokenness and a need for repair

Secondly, **responding** to the brokenness by doing something to enable the repair

Thirdly, **restoring** that which was broken to something like it was before

Let's start with **Recognising** brokenness. As we have highlighted over the last few weeks the relationship the Israelites, the people of God, had with their creator, their Father, had become broken. As a nation they had frequently worshipped other gods, gone against God's commands and gone their own way. The prophets indicated that this led to their own brokenness as God allowed them to be invaded by Babylon, and their nation destroyed. Their magnificent temple, the place where God dwelt amongst them, which despite their unfaithfulness they still valued, was destroyed and ransacked by the Babylonians who also carried many of them off to Babylon, especially those who had power and influence.

Through words from God's prophets the Israelites began to acknowledge and recognise the reasons they were in exile and that it was not something they could do anything about and so they cried out to God.

However, despite their turning away from Him the Israelites were loved by God as his children and he couldn't leave that relationship in disrepair. So God **responded** to their recognition of brokenness by beginning a process of repair to both the relationship with Him and their situation in exile. Ezra 1 says how God was behind Persian king Cyrus' proclamation which would allow the Israelites to return to their homeland to rebuild

their temple and settle back there. This fulfilled prophecies from Jeremiah he says, a reference to Jeremiah 50:9 and 51:11, as well as the one from Isaiah 45 that we looked at four weeks ago. These prophecies were to show that it was always part of God's plan. All the more remarkable because we have to remember that it was the Babylonians who had invaded Judah, but the prophecy referred to a Persian king, Cyrus, which was fulfilled when the Persians invaded Babylon and took over their empire.

But there also needed to be a response from the Jews in exile. Cyrus didn't force anyone to go, or give them an edict they had to go. It wasn't a form of ethnic cleansing, trying to rid the land of the Jews by telling them to go home, they had a choice. They could respond to the work of God through Cyrus and be part of God's plan for rebuilding their homeland or they could stay where they had settled for two generations. As hinted at in v5 clearly not all responded by joining the exodus.

Having responded to their need by enabling them to return to their homeland and rebuild their temple, in a wonderful act of grace God then enables a **restoration** of the glory of the temple. We'll look at the actual rebuilding of the temple a bit more over the next two weeks, but at this stage we should note the importance of the temple in Jewish life. It was highly significant because it was where God dwelt amongst his people, and what God wants more than anything else, as we see throughout the bible, is to dwell amongst us, to have relationship with us. During exile the synagogue system of local places to gather, worship and learn was created and they learnt that God was present everywhere even without a temple. But before exile the only real place of worship was the temple in Jerusalem, and so it was at the heart of their spiritual life and the first thing the Jews wanted to restore when they returned to their homeland.

Cyrus' heart is moved to proclaim in his edict in Ezra 1 that the local people are to provide the returning Jews with silver, gold, goods, livestock, offerings for the temple, everything they would need to make that temple special and help them set up home. Cyrus also returned all the temple treasures to the returning Jews which had been ransacked by the Babylonians when they destroyed the previous temple decades earlier. What I love about this is that God's restoration was not minimal, the Jews were lavishly blessed with all that they needed and more so that the temple they would build could once again reflect something of God's glory. Last week when we looked at Ezekiel 36 Sam spoke of how part of why God restored the fortunes of the Jews, his people, was for the sake of His Holy name, his reputation, and we see that here as well in the provision of all they needed for the temple and their return. In enabling the temple to be restored to something of its former glory, God's holy name would be glorified, both through his using pagan leaders to enable his purposes and in providing the materials for a magnificent temple to

worship him, where he would be physically present with his people one more.

That of course is the image in Revelation 22, that ultimate return of God's people from exile, estranged from closeness to God by the Fall, to the true promised land of the new heaven and new earth where God restores all things, including our relationship with him, where he will dwell forever with his people and be their light.

So here in Ezra we see God at work in his cosmic repair shop, recognising the problem, responding by enabling the repair and then restoring things to something of their former glory. We will see more over the next couple of weeks what the restored temple would look like: glorious, yet not exactly the same.

And how does this relate to the COVID pandemic and our returning to the New Normal? I would encourage you to think for yourself, but here are just a few pointers:

Firstly, I think we need to **recognise** a number of things. Not that this pandemic is necessarily punishment for turning away from God, but that we as humans are not masters of this world, only God is. We cannot prevent or instantly stop a pandemic. God has given us scientists, medical staff and politicians who can work together to minimise the effect, but we are not God, there is only one. We must recognise our limitations, our selfishness and sinfulness and our need of a close relationship with a divine saviour.

Secondly, we need to **respond** to this recognition of our limitations. We should humble ourselves, reflect on our lifestyles and our relationship with God. Are we giving him the glory he deserves in the way we live? Are we desiring him and trusting in him foremost rather than desiring the pleasures of this world and trusting in them which the pandemic has shown us are fleeting and unreliable?

Thirdly, as we return to a New Normal, we need to look at what God wants to **restore** in our lives and our churches. Now is a good time to reflect on our lifestyles. Have we been doing what God wants in our work, in our service to him and in our church life? Are there new things he has for us? Might his restoration be something of the past, but in a new way as I was talking about two weeks ago? And can we trust God, to do what he did for the returning exiles to provide what we need, for this restoration?

What needs repairing in your life? Recognise the problem, respond by bringing it to God in his repair shop and allow him to work with you to restore it to something wonderful that will bring him glory.