

Kerrisdale Presbyterian Church

"More than Lip Service"

Scripture: Ezra 7:1-10 and 9:1-15 and 10:1-5; Psalm 51:1-12 refrain II; Matthew 22:34-40

Hymns: 429 Your strong word; 715 Love the Lord your God; 575 Lead me, Lord; 569

O Jesus, I have promised (Tune: Thornbury)

November 15

Rev. Steve Filyk

They were upfront about the schedule.

When they recruited the young players.

It was a difficult regime!

There would be time in the gym

To build strength and endurance.

There would be time on the ice

To develop talents and refine skills.

There would be time in the locker-room

Reviewing performance and honing strategy.

And yes there would also be games.

They were upfront about the regiment

Of the elite sports program.

And everyone: the players, the parents,

The coaches and the sponsors

Were prepared to make things work.

But somewhere mid-season

Things started going sideways.

All it took was a few missed workouts

A few missed practises...

But when coaches, the coaches not the players,

Couldn't keep up to the standard,

The team's morale dropped

And so did their performance.

PAUSE

Today we are continuing our journey

Through the Old Testament book of Ezra.

We've been following the people of Israel

Who have been repatriated from Babylon.

We've been watching these exiles

get re-established in their homeland.

Things have been going well,

At least on the face of it.

They've settled into new homes

And they've rebuilt the Temple.

God's people have been re-established in the Promised Land.

Of course things aren't always what they seem.

While worship has been restored in Israel

The life of the people,

The life of the people needs to be reformed.

Enter Ezra.

Ezra the man for whom this book is named after,

Finally joins the other exiles

Two generations after the first wave.

He comes to them

With a royal commission from King Artaxerxes

To administer justice

And to teach the people God's law.<sup>1</sup>

Ezra has a good pedigree:

He descends from the priestly line of Aaron.

Ezra is well educated:

He's a scribe who's skilled in the Law.

Ezra is also a man of integrity.  
 As our passage notes:  
 Ezra “set his heart to study the law of the Lord,  
 and to do it,

and to teach the statutes and ordinances in Israel.”<sup>ii</sup>

Ezra walks the talk.

This combination of character and skills  
 Make Ezra an effective teacher and leader.  
 And in less than half a year  
 People are sharing their concerns with him.

Officials make an appointment  
 And tell him about trouble within the leadership:  
 They are marrying the locals.

You’ll recall that when the Temple  
 Was first being re-established  
 the leaders spurned attempts from the locals  
 To co-opt their project.

They recognised their need to maintain control  
 And guard their unique identity as God’s people.

They knew the law.  
 They knew their calling.

And what was stated in Deuteronomy was abundantly clear:

When the Lord your God brings you  
 into the land that you are about to enter and occupy,  
 and he clears away many nations before you—  
 the Hittites, the Girgashites, the Amorites, the Canaanites,  
 the Perizzites, the Hivites, and the Jebusites,  
 even nations mightier and more  
 numerous than you...

Make no covenant with them and show them no mercy.  
 Do not intermarry with them,  
 giving your daughters to their sons  
 or taking their daughters for your sons,

for that would turn away your children from following me,  
 to serve other gods...

For you are a people holy to the Lord your God;  
 the Lord your God has chosen you  
 out of all the peoples on earth to be his people,  
 his treasured possession.”<sup>iii</sup>

The exiles knew that law.  
 And they understood its intention.  
 They were to guard their religious identity.  
 They were to be ‘holy’—set apart for God.

This concern motivated the jealousy  
 The exiles showed in maintaining control  
 Over the Temple building project.

And yet only two generations later,  
 This concern has been forgotten.

It’s not that the people  
 Have lost their way;  
 Their leaders have been side-tracked.

Yes they continue to lead worship.  
 But they are not keeping all the law’s requirements.  
 They are picking and choosing  
 When and where they will be obedient.

For his part Ezra is shocked  
 When he learns about this scandal.  
 He expresses this grief, this despair  
 In a very public way.

He tears up his clothes  
 And shreds his cape.  
 He pulls out his hair  
 And plucks out his beard.

He falls to his knees  
 And raises his hand to heaven.  
 Ezra prays to God.

That prayer which Ezra offers  
 Identifies himself with the mistakes of his people.

He describes the peoples' guilt  
 In terms of quantity:  
 It is 'higher than our heads'  
 And has 'mounted up to the heavens'.

He describes the peoples' guilt  
 In terms of history:  
 How it runs from 'the day of our ancestors  
 To this day'.

He ends with "clear recognition  
 that God has every reason  
 to wash his hands of this community...  
 his prayer [is] naked confession, without excuses..."<sup>iv</sup>.

If people are enabled to see their sin  
 Through Ezra's preaching,  
 They are pierced to the heart  
 By his prayers.

While Ezra weeps a great number of people join him 'weeping bitterly'.  
 And they urge him to lead them in an act of repentance;  
 His despair "provokes them  
 to seek hope for Israel at any cost..."<sup>v</sup>

PAUSE

What if Ezra worshipped with us  
 For a few months of Sundays...  
 Would he hear stories about compromise?  
 Would he observe partial obedience?

What if Ezra didn't just come to church  
 but spent a week with every single one of us?

Shadowing us at work...  
 And observing us at home...

Sitting in on our conversations with our children and our spouse.  
 Watching us shop and clean up our bedrooms.  
 Listening to us interact with our neighbors.  
 Looking over our shoulder as we watch TV.

What if Ezra spent a week with each one of us?  
 Would he be celebrating the fact  
 That we live faithfully before our God?

Or would he be weeping  
 the fact that we have compromised our devotion,  
 even when God has proven faithful.

What do you think?

I don't think I'd want to have Ezra looking over my shoulder.  
 A man of integrity like Ezra  
 would notice the inconsistencies in my life.

And he wouldn't wink and smile  
 And say 'nobody's perfect...  
 Don't worry about that..'

I don't think I'd want Ezra looking over my life...  
 All the same I could see that there would be value  
 In having someone like Ezra visit.

I mean I think that all of us long  
 For a deeper sort of integrity.

We long for those competing desires  
 And conflicting motivations  
 That war within us  
 To be tamed and redirected.

In our heart of hearts  
 We long to be faithful children of God.

Ezra in his words and example  
 In his despair over disobedience  
 Comes to tell us that this cannot continue.

And this prods us to consider...  
 'Is there a better way?'

PAUSE

If you want to believe there is a better way  
 I invite you to join in with me  
 In that prayer of repentance of Ezra.  
 A prayer that finds its completion in  
 The forgiveness and restoration of Christ.

Let's pray:

"My dear God, I'm so totally ashamed,  
 I can't bear to face you. O my God—  
 our iniquities are piled up so high  
 that we can't see out;  
 our guilt touches the skies.

We've been stuck in a muck of guilt  
 since the time of our ancestors until right now..."

You have always been faithful.  
 So much of the time we are faithless...

But because you sent us Jesus  
 We know that all is not lost.  
 We know that there is still hope for your people...

Forgive us our failings.  
 Help us to choose to do  
 What is pleasing to you,  
 Even when it is difficult.

Fill us now with the power of your Spirit  
 That we might know what is right  
 And have the power to practise it.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

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<sup>i</sup> See Ezra's mandate from King Artaxerxes in 6:25ff

<sup>ii</sup> Ezra 7:10 NRSV

<sup>iii</sup> Deuteronomy 7:1-4 abridged NRSV

<sup>iv</sup> Derek Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah* 78

<sup>v</sup> Derek Kidner *Ezra and Nehemiah* 79