

Intro

In the fifty-fifth year, in the first month on the tenth day, while I was among the exiles by the Great Stour River, the heavens opened and I saw....

This is the way that Ezekiel starts his report on his calling to be a prophet of God. I changed it so it applies to me. Not that I sat today at the Stour River, as it was too cold, and neither were you with me (again too cold) nor did I see the vision that Ezekiel saw. And you could say, Bernard, that is ridiculous. Ezekiel saw this vision of God in his time and his situation and therefore it only applies to him and for the people at his time. It does not apply to us. The situation that Ezekiel and the Israelite exiles were in was totally different. They had been forced out of their land and were waiting to return, we are happily still living the country that we were born in or have moved to out of choice. We are not exiles! So this does not bear any relation to us!

The book of Ezekiel

But the question then remains, why is this book in the Hebrew Bible and why have we as Christians chosen to keep this book in our version of the Bible? Is it not because over

time the story, the visions and the warnings of Ezekiel are relevant at any time? And if that is the case, why is the book of Ezekiel relevant today? Shall we find out?

Ezekiel

We do not know a lot of Ezekiel. His father was Buzi, his name means “God strengthens” or “May God strengthen”. He was a priest or in training to become a priest and he was deported to Babylonia. He lived in a town called Tel Abib, he was married, but we do not know his wife’s name or if he has children. What we do know of Ezekiel is that he has a bizarre means of communicating: using muteness, lying bound on the ground, digging holes in houses... speaking about strange visions, fascination with faeces and blood... surreal and very shocking. [And I have to warn you, I am encouraging you to read this book with me over the next six weeks, parts of it may be difficult to swallow.]

Ezekiel’s first vision

The first three chapters of Ezekiel tell about the vision in which he was commissioned by God as a prophet and what his charge is. Today we are focusing on the start of the vision. And after the short introduction of who Ezekiel is, we get a much longer introduction of who God is, as that is what this vision is about, as becomes clear at the end of the chapter.

Ezekiel (and we) cannot get a clear picture of God – we are not allowed to see God face to face, and I think it is for our own protection. Because this vision relates to us a God who majestic, powerful, immense. [We saw a drawing in the video, you can see that this drawing does not do the vision justice from these words].

I am not going in the detail, I just want to bring all the elements together: a wind-storm, cloud, light and lightning, fire, the four strange creatures who turn out to be a type of angel: called cherubim, who are very mobile: moving from place to place very quickly, the Spirit, the wheels or the wheels within wheels, the wings of the cherubim, sometimes stretched, sometimes on the side, the wings covering the cherubim, the different faces of the cherubim, a dome above the cherubim and an expanse, the sound of the wings, like the voice of the Almighty, the throne with a figure of a man, waist up glowing metal, waist down fire, surrounded by brilliant light and a radiant rainbow....

“This was the appearance of the likeness of the glory of God”
v28b, and Ezekiel fell face down.... <Pause>

There is no doubt in Ezekiel’s mind that this is God. And there are many elements in this vision that have been

associated with God before Ezekiel. The wind is a sign for the Spirit (Ruach, means both wind and spirit), the fire and the light, the smoke (the column in the desert with Moses, earthquake, wind and fire with Elijah in the desert).

The cherubim, platform and throne point towards the ark of the covenant in the temple. All of these are the traditional signs of the presence of God, but the wheels, the cherubim and chariot shape suddenly make God dynamic, not fixed in one place, i.e. the Temple. No, God has come out to Babylon to see the exiles.

It must have been in one way very reassuring for Ezekiel to understand that God is also present in Babylon. What is a real shock for him (and maybe for us too) is the imagery that God uses to present himself. This is the almighty God, beyond all human power and majesty. Beyond all human conception, supernatural instead of previously enhanced natural forces. But also personal – God displays himself as a person – a figure like a human, whom, although very alien to both Ezekiel and us, Ezekiel can have a conversation with, have a relationship with. God shows himself in a different light than before. And God came to the exiles.

Do we see God in this way?

Do we see God in this way? Or are we used to see God in Jesus, the God who became human being, who died on the cross for us? The God who humbled himself and paid the price for our sins. But are we aware how strongly God has humbled himself in Jesus? if vision is the normal way that God shows himself? Paul writes in Ephesians:

¹⁸ I pray that the eyes of your heart may be enlightened in order that you may know the hope to which he has called you, the riches of his glorious inheritance in his holy people, ¹⁹ and his incomparably great power for us who believe. That power is the same as the mighty strength ²⁰ he exerted when he raised Christ from the dead and seated him at his right hand in the heavenly realms, ²¹ far above all rule and authority, power and dominion, and every name that is invoked, not only in the present age but also in the one to come. (Eph 1:18-21)

This, is the God for whom we, with, Ezekiel also bow down and say with Peter: My Lord and my God.

<pause>

But when we read on in Ezekiel, we see immediately that God lifts Ezekiel up (2,1-2), and wants to speak to him and relate with him. This is like the God we do see in Jesus as well! The relational God.

Can God come to us in this way? Does God come to us in this way at this time?

Virtual exile

Because we may not be in a physical exile, but it feel that we are in virtual exile. We slive in a nation that has turned away from God and is worshipping different Gods. Some see Science in this way, others are using all kinds of spiritualities to seek deeper meaning. And because each is looking at different means of salvation, each has different ideas of what is best for them and for the country. Hence the polarisation of views, which we can see in the UK and EU, and is very pronounced in the USA.

But we also find us living in a world that seems to come adrift. A world that does not value authorities, and has experienced authorities not worth valuing. It is disappointed, adrift and start to loose it sense of meaning and purpose. Some then see the virus as punishment or wake-up call from God to the nations to return to him. Like being in exile was

God's wake up call to the nation of Israel. But they did not understand – Ezekiel had to tell them, and had to warn them that there was going to be another exile and the destruction of the Temple, before they believed him.

And like Ezekiel we as the Church have a role to play in helping people to see God's plan for them. Paul continues to in Ephesians:

²² And God placed all things under his feet and appointed him to be head over everything for the church, ²³ which is his body, the fullness of him who fills everything in every way. (Eph 1:22-23)

The God that we meet in Ezekiel's vision has put Christ at the head of his Church, his body. Without the head the body can't do anything: it is dead. But with Christ the body of Christ comes alive. And Christ is the head over everything (all creation) for the church (for us!).

But a body without its head is useless. So what do we look to in our daily lives? The authorities of science, politicians and governments, or are we looking to Christ, who is the head of the Church?

If we look to Christ, we find that we not worry so much, but we also find that he is calling us. In his own way he is calling each of us to be Ezekiel in this time – to warn the people we know and love that without Christ, life is nothing, and death is everything. But with Christ we are alive, and death means nothing. Do you hear God calling?

Amen.