

'Starting again'

Returning to life after lockdown

"Who of you is left who saw this house in its former glory? How does it look to you now? Does it not seem to you like nothing? But now be strong ..." (Haggai 2.3f)

As the lockdown restrictions are gradually eased and we return bit by bit to the rhythms of congregational life, the return of the exiles from Babylon provides an instructive, parallel narrative.

The return from Babylon was both gradual and difficult: it's narrated in the two books Ezra and Nehemiah (which were originally one book), and the ministry of Haggai and Zechariah had an integral part to play in the challenges facing the people back then.

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4. Willing volunteers

".. when the people willingly offer themselves .."

Ezra 2.1-70

The quote is from the start of Deborah's song (Ju.5.2) praising God for the people of that earlier generation who'd stepped out in faith to share in a remarkable work of God. This chapter, too, is all about 'the willing volunteers among the people' (Ju.5.9).

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1. **Read Ezra 2.1-70.** It's a long chapter, with a lot of unfamiliar names, but it's worth reading your way through the whole chapter (there are deliberate echoes of Numbers 1).

Why do you think so much of the chapter is taken up with this list of names and numbers?

What has God used to move your heart to offer yourself willingly in the service of Christ?

2. Read Ezra 2.1-58. The leaders (vv.1-2), the people (vv.3-35) and the priests, Levites and temple retainers (vv.36-58), who went back to Jerusalem are listed here in order.

Why do you think there's such a disparity between the number of priests who returned and the number of Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants?

If there was a list of those volunteering to 'build the house of the Lord' (1.5) in Scotland today, how would you describe *your* 'line of spiritual descent'? Through whose ministry did the Lord bring you to new life in Christ?

3. Read Ezra 2.59-63. Among those returning were some who couldn't trace their ancestry, either, in the case of some, to Israel, or, in the case of others, more specifically to the priesthood.

Read **2 Sam.19.3-39**: it seems that Barzillai's son-in-law had preferred his father-in-law's family line to his own

descent from Aaron the priest: do you struggle at all between the call to ministry and the lure of materialism?

4. Read Ezra 2.64-70. A substantial number of exiles returned (the total number is greater than those named), and although in themselves not that wealthy they were committed to the cause.

The 'freewill offerings towards the rebuilding of the house of God on its site' (v.68) was an investment: how do you think this might apply to you in Scotland today?

'The house of the Lord in Jerusalem' (v.68) was of course in ruins: why would the sight of that have prompted the 'freewill offerings'? Do you see parallels for ourselves?