

'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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6. Mixed emotions

".. the shouts of joy .. the sound of weeping .."

Ezra 3.7-13

The temple had a huge significance to the people of Israel: it was, for them, the place where the presence of God was most patently located – and accordingly making a start on the rebuilding of the temple was a momentous milestone for them.

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1. Read Ezra 3.7-13. The passage explains how the people went about the work of rebuilding the temple, and describes the mixture of emotions which they felt.

What explained the starkly contrasting emotions which found expression among the people at this time?

Can you relate to that at all, a feeling of both great gratitude and great grief at the same time – and if so in what ways?

2. Read Ezra 3.7-9. The people were clearly deliberate in how they went about rebuilding of the temple, seeking to model their approach on the way the first temple had been built.

As you read **1 Kings 5.1-6.1** what are the points of similarity with Ezra 3.7-8?

Why do you think they were so keen to copy the way the first temple had been built? What are the benefits, and what are the dangers of 'copying' former generations? Are there Christians you 'copy'?

3. Read Ezra 3.10-11. Great care was evidently also taken over the 'Order of Service', reflecting the instructions of David (1 Chr.16) and the prophecy of Jeremiah (Jer.33.10-11).

Why do you think the people picked up on this particular theme as they sang to the Lord?

When (if ever!) have you found yourself prompted to give 'a great shout of praise to the Lord'?

4. Read Ezra 3.12-13. Alongside the 'whooping' there was also some 'weeping' on the part of the older exiles who were returning, presumably not muffled but quite vociferous.

Why would these older Israelites have found themselves weeping?

Are you prone to starting on a course of action with great enthusiasm, but then not completing it?