

19th July – Ezra 5:1-5 & 6:1a,6-10 ‘Holding fast to God’

46 years ago a young musician felt prompted by God to set all 150 Psalms in the bible to music. Jeff Lowe was a talented folk singer who had recently become a Christian, and in 1974 he began his epic journey. Over the next 40+ years he privately composed music and settings for each psalm, and – now aged 72 – in January this year the first psalm (number 6) was released publicly. Over the next two years all of the completed psalms will be recorded and released as The Jeff Lowe Psalms Project. It is a remarkable act of devotion and dedication to finishing what you believe the Lord called you to start.

Today we pick up the story of Ezra again and the rebuilding of the temple. We ended last week with the foundations being laid, and this extraordinary scene of conflicting emotions as some shouted for joy and others wept, because it wasn't like it was before. At this point, the returned Jewish exiles face an unexpected moral dilemma. They get offered help – which might seem like a good thing, only the offer came from a surprising source: the Samaritans.

Now this might be a familiar name to many of you, and for us the name has positive associations: we think of Jesus' story of the Good Samaritan, and the wonderful charity named after him who took on the mantle of helping those in need. But this is not how the Jewish settlers would have reacted. The Samaritans had been their enemies for a long time. Shortly after King Solomon's reign had ended 400 years previously, Israel had painfully split in two – into the Northern and Southern kingdoms. Both had set up rival kings and over the years the Northern Kingdom, which became known as Samaria, in particular had increasingly wandered away from the historic pattern of faith given by God to His people.

The Samaritans began to hedge their bets and worship pagan gods alongside the one true God, and the climax of this corruption was the conquest of the Northern Kingdom of Israel in 722 by the Assyrian empire. To cement their power, the Assyrians adopted a new policy of encouraging other inhabitants of their empire to colonise Samaria, thereby mixing up their religion even more.

So when the Samaritans approach Zerubbabel in chapter 4 and offer help, the Jewish settlers feel they have no option but to refuse. The downfall of God's people had been caused by corrupting their religious practice in the first place, so they weren't about to go down the same route again.

But the result of holding fast to their principles was very costly – first, the Samaritans began a programme of bribery and intimidation to frustrate the work during the time of King Cyrus. Then under his successor Artaxerxes they took their campaign to the top and got the king himself to forbid any more work on the temple.

By the time we get to the start of King Darius' reign in chapter 5, nearly 40 years have passed since rebuilding started. Zerubbabel is now an old man but the prophet Zechariah prophesies that he will indeed finish what he started. Haggai – the other prophet named at the start of our reading – also reminds God's people that they've got rather too comfortable building their own houses and forgotten about God's house. You can read both prophets near the end of the Old Testament, and maybe their prophecies will make a lot more sense now you're reading the book of Ezra!

This time the appeal to the king works in favour of God's people. Darius finds the old edict of King Cyrus and they are allowed to start work again. The local treasury will even help to bankroll the work! And we'll celebrate the work's completion with Zerubbabel and the Jewish people next week.

We love happy endings but there's a lesson here for God's people in every generation. There will always be pressure to compromise on what we believe, to water down our faith to make it more culturally acceptable to the world around us. In many ways this subtle pressure to conform is more challenging than the overt ridiculing of our faith. What we believe is too often treated as another form of self-help and not a life-changing encounter with the Lord of heaven and earth. To declare that Jesus is the Way, the Truth and the Life – which is only what he said about himself, not something we made up later – is attractive to some and off-putting to others. For many in other countries, as we'll see in a moment, it is positively dangerous.

But God blesses our determination to put Him first, He always comes through for us in the end. The message of this central part of the book of Ezra is simply this: **hold fast**. Put God first and He'll take care of the rest. Led by Zerubbabel, God's people were able to finish what they started. And we too can take heart that if we choose to stay faithful to Him, if we hold fast, God will hold us fast to Him, and enable to us walk faithfully as His people.

I'll return to Jeff Lowe for the final word: 'The Lord got me started on this work. And I'm sure he'll help me to complete it.' Amen.

I'll invite us to respond in two ways. First I'm going to show a short video produced by Open Doors which tells a few stories of those who faced challenges for their faith around the world, but who held fast and overcame with God's help. Then we'll hear the beautiful hymn 'Be still, my soul' to shape our prayers – for the suffering church, for ourselves, for all God's people everywhere....