

23/2/20 South

2 Chron 36:17-end; John 6:57-64

Well, we're at the end of 2 Chronicles, and I've enjoyed it more than I expected. I've liked the mix of what you might call "Institution and Intimacy", the mix of the very big public issues with the tenderness of the human heart.

What we've heard in Chronicles is about a God who has come down. He is the God who cannot be contained, the God of heaven and earth, the God whose eyes roam around the earth. And yet, he has "come down" to place his very self at the heart of his own people, Israel. He commands the building of a Temple, where he will be found, as a sign that he is with them intimately.

And the Temple is a huge feature of Chronicles – built for the most magnificent purpose, that God should dwell with humanity. And, because he had shown his tenderness and intimacy with them, they could utterly rely upon him. Indeed, they must. To rely on anything else is a dangerous idolatry. God has come down and made himself known; we surrender to his purpose and follow him.

But the tenderness is matched by the great set-pieces of the institution. If, like me, you feel like much of your job is making rotas, then 2 Chronicles is your book – there are rotas for playing music, rotas for the priesthood, rotas for standing in procession. God is close and intimate, but he makes himself known mostly in the great gatherings, the assemblies of the people, perhaps addressed by a prophet. And those assemblies are always assemblies of praise, the setting forth of the truth of God as a kind of prophetic declaration that "this is our God and we are his people". God has come down, to be among his people, supremely as they are gathered.

All of which I mention because of the way the book ends. Our translation has it exactly right. "...go up". Let's review the history just a little.

Just before our reading today started, we learn from vv15 and 16 that the people ignored what the prophets said. And what was it that the prophets (supremely Jeremiah, as in v.21) had said? "God is moving his house to Babylon. You, his people, have acted so badly, your worship has been so wicked, your courts have been so corrupt that I am taking the lot of you away, and I will cleanse the land." So the people go, but so do the fine objects of the Temple.

And we need to review the history for a reason. Because we don't know it and we haven't been taught it. I checked with Jen Tunguz. Kids' Church-type materials cover in great detail the stories of the Exodus: the baby in the bulrushes, the mountain, the law, the golden calves, the plagues and so on. And it has its own book. But few of us realise just how important to the people themselves was the history called the Exile. Now, in fairness, there's reason why Kids' Church doesn't deal with it: there are no stories. Most of the stories are from the before or the after, and they're fairly horrible. Well, there's Daniel in the den. Then again, the story is complicated: the northern kingdom gets taken into exile in 721, and the south not until 587 (covered today in v.17). So it's messy. AND then Babylon itself changes hands: At v.27, it's the capital of the Assyrian, or Chaldean Empire, but then Cyrus, king of Persia, conquers Assyria and establishes the Persian Empire. In the process, he took over Palestine. You see, it's not quite Kids' Church stuff, is it.

Now Chronicles is written after the exile is over. At the start of the series, I said that Chronicles was written to describe the period of the Golden Age, to look back on what God had done and think, "It could happen again". So it's really important how the Chronicler ends his tale.

And he does it by recording the command of the new Emperor. Not now Nebuchadnezzar of Assyria, but Cyrus of Persia. And Cyrus was very different. From Isaiah, we learn that Cyrus was the instrument of God's

purpose. He commands that the exiles be allowed to return home and rebuild the Temple. God is sending people and Temple back to the land.

When the peoples of the story talk about going to God's city, Jerusalem, they speak of "going up to Jerusalem". Those in Jerusalem speak of "going up" to the Temple. Is there anywhere in NL that you "go up" to?

And Chronicles is the last book of the Bible, in the Hebrew arrangement of the Scriptures. So the last word is "Let him go up". God had come down to be with his people. Yet, when they were most with him, at his Temple in the holy City, they would have to "go up" to it. V 17 is a terrible verse to read, as God judges his disobedient people, abandoning them to the Babylonians. But vv.22 and 23 have this triumphant hope as the Chronicler takes the reality of the new Emperor, Cyrus, and they record him using the same language as their most sacred liturgies: "let him / let us go up".

Now, I want to tell you what most grabbed me about this text. This little phrase "go up".

So, a little work. Here is that word in the Greek translation of the Hebrew – **anabainw**, and spelt out in English. Take that word and run it through the New Testament. Again, you will find that it often means "to go up to Jerusalem, to go up to the Temple". But it becomes the word taken over for the great "going up", as Jesus "goes up" to be with his Father. That's why Jesus can say in our Gospel reading from John, "what if you were to see the Son of Man ascending to where he was before?" "Going up to".

The point is this. In this last book of the Bible, and in the gospels of Jesus, the God who comes down to dwell with his people, is met by the people who go up to be with God. When Cyrus says "let him go up", it becomes, as the later story unfolds, a prophecy, a profound hope of the one who has come down and who will go up, his work completed, taking it all to

God, to his Father and our Father. The last word of the Hebrew Bible is the word of hope, hope beyond exile. **[CLEAR]**

What does this all mean? Well, it means one thing at least, and it doesn't mean one thing at least.

I haven't gone looking, but I'm sure there are interpretations that say, "Dreadful things may happen to us, but there is always hope – Cyrus came along and they got to go up".

And that really would be the most appallingly cruel interpretation, as though Cyrus was only an illustration of a wider truth, instead of which he is the one single character for God to make a very singular point. And I call the interpretation cruel because I care about you. It really amounts to no more than "always look on the bright side of life". This week we were contacted for prayer by a church minister who had flown to Amsterdam to accompany his brother who was on a path to death. That was certain, because he had chosen to die by euthanasia on Wednesday. "Despite death, there's always hope". Such a response dismisses the reality of pain, and the awful stories of disaster that accompany the human condition. And so I do not want to be saying to you, "Yes, you may be going through it, but, despite your circumstance – the last words are words of hope".

Because what's wrong with that? The hope is generic. That is, it's hope without location, or specifics or hope-about-anything. We really must not pretend that the world will end on a note of vague hope, because there is simply no such certainty. If you are the mother of one of the young men killed with the sword in v.17, anyone telling you "There's always hope" will likely get a slap, and deserve it.

The truth is that there IS hope, but it is of a specific kind, a Cyrus kind. Not long ago, I had a conversation with a few friends that I found quite disheartening. We were all talking about the promises of life after death,

promises of the eternal future. Some simply didn't believe it, some didn't think it would matter; there was scepticism about the sheer reality of it all. So, for the sake of any thinking the same, it becomes very important to be clear about what specific hope Christian hope is. It's quite fun to march around the building, but it suddenly becomes "not-fun" if the hope isn't true.

Look at Cyrus' words – they are extraordinary. V. 23 "The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth". Cyrus is recognising "The Lord", that is "Yahweh", the God of this exiled people, as the one and only God of heaven. No more the thousand idols of Assyria, but now, from Cyrus the Persian, the recognition of one true God, and Yahweh, the LORD, is his name.

Then, the Temple is to be rebuilt by "whoever is among you of all his people". Cyrus recognises that this God has a people, a people who, even in exile, have been known as his, who have not assimilated to the culture around (that's what the story of Daniel is about), but have retained their commitment to this Lord.

And, in that context, there is hope. There is hope, not for those in generic difficult circumstances, but for those who have come through the fire as the people who are called by his name.

And that seems to me to be how the promise of hope can rightly be transferred from the going up at the end of II Chronicles, to the "going up" of Jesus. And that of course also means all those in him, to be united with the Father in a future where there is no more going up or coming down, but one constant dwelling. All those in him, and self-identifying with him.

If we are not those willing to let ourselves be known as among God's people, then the sufferings we experience are simply those normal in human circumstance. But this people's suffering was precisely because they were

known as the Lord's, and so this people's hope centred on Temple, identity and the promise of God's presence.

If we confine our Christian existence to inside the walls of a north European building that keeps out the wind and the wet, then there is no real hope for us. Hope, real hope, real "going up" hope to be in the presence of God is only for those who know the intimacy of his presence – his presence as the God who draws near the repentant humble-hearted. And it is for those who then declare that presence by the equivalent of the great assembly and the marching bands. Hope is real for those making themselves known as his.

A picture to finish with [**SHOW**]. Last week saw the 5<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 21 Coptic Christian men murdered by Islamists in Libya. Their commitment was extraordinary. But what I find most amazing of all is the prayer of the Egyptian church. They ask us to stop praying that persecution would cease. That is not what they "hope" for. It is that, in persecution, which they know will continue, they may be faithful, and so come to their hope. They, too, want to "go up".

*Prayer of hope in knowing intimately and being known publicly.*