Zechariah 9 v9-12

**9**Rejoice greatly, Daughter Zion!
    Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
    righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey.
**10**I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
    and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
    and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations.
    His rule will extend from sea to sea
    and from the River**[**[**b**](https://www.biblica.com/bible/niv/zechariah/9/#footnote-23010b)**]** to the ends of the earth.
**11**As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
    I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
**12**Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope;
    even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you.

Firstly, let’s put a bit of context around the old testament reading

Today’s OT reading is taken from the book we know as Zechariah. A prophet to the people of Judah, the majority of the book is thought to have been written at the time of the Babylonian exile. However, Theologians generally consider that chapters 9-14 may have been written at a later date by someone else.

In Zechariah’s time the nation of Israel was a kingdom divided split between the Northern Kingdom of Israel (Ephraim) and the Southern Kingdom (Judah). Zechariah was a prophet in the Kingdom of Judah, centred on Jerusalem.

Both kingdoms were often overrun, and to be honest it was in a bit of a mess

In 587BC the Babylonians overran Judah and destroyed Jerusalem and most importantly the Temple, (this is a critical fact, as the temple is central to the worship of Yaweh (God), forcing the Judean people into exile in Babylon to become slaves, (recounted by Boney M ‘by the rivers of Babylon’, circa 1978, The Melodians 1970….. or for the purist Psalm 137)

The old testament prophets tell us that the exile lasted for about 70 years until 538 B.C. when Babylon fell to Cyrus of Persia, Cyrus made it possible for the Judean exiles to return to Jerusalem and they started to rebuild the temple.

We start todays reading with a time of praise, thanksgiving and acclamation

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    Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
    righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey”.

Judah has spent the last seventy years in Babylon in exile kept as slaves, no power, no king of any kind, nowhere to worship, and forced to eat humble pie during their exile, “how can we sing the Lords song in a strange land” and now they are released, liberated, but liberated into a destroyed city with a sacked temple and uneasy relationships with the surrounding nations, this is not a walk in the park for Judah.

 I would imagine that when Zechariah suggestion that the daughters of Jerusalem should rejoice, is a message would have been received with groans and scowls, as he was talking to a people on the verge of giving up and I would think that for the people of Jerusalem the thought that their king will come to them “righteous and victorious” , was miles away from their experience and expectation

So

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    Shout, Daughter Jerusalem!
See, your king comes to you,
    righteous and victorious,
lowly and riding on a donkey,
    on a colt, the foal of a donkey”.

This would have been a new revelation to the first hearers, either a sign of hope or the rantings of a mad man

For us, this is a familiar piece of scripture, and one we missed hearing over Easter.

Matthew 21:5 and then in John 12:15 the theme stared by Zechariah 9:9 is picked up and reused highlighting Israel’s new hope following Jesus’ triumphal entry into Jerusalem.

For Zechariah’s audience this was new and exciting news a prophet foretelling a new kingship with a king who would be righteous and victorious. A king that the people could depend on righteous, which is defined as “the quality or state of being morally correct and justifiable. It can be considered synonymous with "rightness" or being "upright" but also a king who will save his people (victorious).

Interestingly, the tone of the verse then changes and Zechariah shared that the long-awaited king would be “riding on a donkey.” Their king will come riding a donkey. A beast of burden, now it was not uncommon for people to ride donkeys, but they were normal people, peasants, farmers, not kings, a king and a warrior would usually ride a charger, ready for battle, ready to Lord it over the nation. By placing the king on a donkey Zechariah is signposting the reader to the hope that the messiah-king bring peace, come riding a donkey is a sign of peaceful intentions which he further explores in verse 10.

**10 “**I will take away the chariots from Ephraim
    and the warhorses from Jerusalem,
    and the battle bow will be broken.
He will proclaim peace to the nations”.

Zechariah is going a step further now, not only a new king, but a king that was going to reunite Israel, many of you will be aware that in the reign of King Solomon's son, Rehoboam, around **930 BC, Israel was divided into 2 kingdoms,** this made her a weaker nation and there had been numerous conflicts between the 2 kingdoms. So here we have Zechariah not only proclaiming a new king but also a new unity

Ephraim representing the Northern Kingdom (Israel), and Jerusalem represents the Southern Kingdom (Judah).

It would seem that the history of the Holy Land has always been contentious at the time of Zechariah the Northern Kingdom (Israel) had been ravaged following be been overrun and was occupied by the Assyrians. In this reading Zechariah brings both Ephraim and Jerusalem together, kicking out the Assyrians and the treat that they posed to Judah and reuniting the kingdoms making them strong and secure once more.

Zechariah is labouring that the coming Messiah will bring peace and unity doing away with the tools of war, and “will speak peace to the nations” (goy). This word goy is often used to mean Gentiles, so this verse holds out the hope of peace not just for the Jews, but also for the Gentiles. This idea of the King reigning all over the world is further strengthened by Zechariah saying he will rule from, “sea to sea” and “from the River to the ends of the earth.

So we have a picture of a new king, he will unite the divided kingdoms, be just and righteous and also humble, but what is he going to do? What does the future hold? The past has been very poor, what about the future!

Zechariah was writing in difficult times and to a people who were in effect on their knees, weakened by oppression, a divided nation, that has virtually given up and he knew that the people needed new hope, a reassurance that despite all God was still in their corner.

**11 “**As for you, because of the blood of my covenant with you,
    I will free your prisoners from the waterless pit.
**12**Return to your fortress, you prisoners of hope;
    even now I announce that I will restore twice as much to you”.

Firstly, Zechariah looks back into history and reminds them that they are a covenanted people, that God has an eternal deal with them secured by Abram and that He is not about to renege on that deal.

Even knowing this, the picture was bleak for Judah

Zechariah was speaking into the collective experience of Judah in exile. A nation ground down after suffering many decades of servitude in Babylon.

And even after they were liberated by Cyrus, they continued to suffer. The re- construction of Jerusalem has been fraught with conflict with neighbouring tribes and nations, progress has been slow, costly and painful.

Judah was a broken nation and the people needed to know that God was with them, thy needed to be encouraged and this is the purpose of this section of the book of Zechariah

Because of this covenant the prophet assures them that God is still with them and acting in their favour I have set free your prisoners from the pit in which there is no water (v. 11b). A “pit in which there is no water” is a place where the prospects of survival would be next to nothing, a place where all hope is lost and the only release from suffering would be death.

Zechariah is using the picture of desolation to speak to the hopelessness that these people have felt and highlight that God has redeemed them, brought them out of the pit.

Zechariah goes on to encourage Judah to return to the stronghold, you prisoners of hope” (v. 12).

Zechariah moves Judah from a pit with no water, a place of certain death to a Stronghold of hope, from death to life, weakness to strength, worry to security.

Zechariah describes Israel as being “prisoners of hope”—an odd phrase that we need to think about a little.

Is Zechariah saying that Israel in some way are still prisoners, in some sense, even though they have been freed from their servitude in Babylon?

Maybe they were still slaves to the old ways, they had returned to a new hope, but this hope, this new life could be hobbled by looking back and not forward

It would seem that to fully benefit from this new king, this new hope, the people will be required to change their minds and the direction of their lives. It will require letting go of the things that have separated them from Yahweh. It will involve embracing Yahweh and Yahweh’s commandments wholeheartedly.

And God wanted to richly bless his people “Even today I declare that I will restore double to you” (v. 12). Jewish law requires that a thief shall repay his victim double for whatever has been stolen (Exodus 22:4-9). The prophet is underlining to the people that they have had a difficult time, but a new king a messiah is coming he will rule the whole world with justice and mercy and he wants to lead his people on, if only they can let go of the past and move forward with him and God will richly bless this new kingdom.

Moving forward 600 years the words of Zechariah were seen to be fulfilled in AD33 when Jesus rode into Jerusalem. Now I know that some will say that this prophecy was fulfilled by Jesus and others would say that Jesus and the Gospel writers redacted and re-enacted their accounts of the life or Christ to fulfil the prophecy and this theological debate will rattle on for ever.

However, whatever your opinion, remember that it is just that an opinion, a theory, and a way of moving closer to understanding God.

Wherever you stand regarding Biblical authority, I think we can all agree that God’s word has meaning and when studied both in context and through the lens of today can help us understand the way God has acted and to consider the way He acts today, so let’s look at this reading, let’s put aside the theological debate and see if we can learn anything or if this word can speak to us today.

Are there any parallels we can see between today and the days of Zechariah?

Well, while we are not over run and forced into slavery by the Babylonians, we do live in a time of division. We have left Europe; the UK is made up of devolved nations that are becoming less dominated by central government,

We have spent 3 months in exile from Church, we have been unable to worship together as we would have liked. The pandemic has been devastating to some families and communities, many have lost loved ones and not been able to say goodbye or attend funerals. Others have been isolated, frightened, lost jobs, homes and security.

Whilst we have not spent 70 years in exile, things have been very difficult for many and around the world they continue to be so.

Like Judah we are now returning to a new thing our exile is ending, but like any returning people, we are returning to a new normal, a new situation, while we have been away the world has moved on and things of different- our Church is physically a better space, we now have carpets and access ramps.

But our worship is not complete, we are not in the same place we were 3 months ago, no communion, no singing, no diddy disciples in church we are ½ back and this is hard. I am guessing that for a while it will remain hard too

Some of you , us will carry the memory of our exile with us, we will have missed occasions that can never be regained, death of relatives, birth of grandchildren, changes in our heath, our mental health our relationships.

Much the same as Judah we need to take heart to have faith, that despite the difficulties we have faced and the challenges to come, we too have a king, who seeks unity, who is just and righteous.

We too have a covenant with God a promise through Jesus that he will always be with us, even until the end of time.

But like Judah we also need to make sure we are not captive, that we are a people free to move into our new situation, free from what we have lost and free to move into the new blessings that God has for us, trusting that right here and right now God is moving amongst his people.