



The Anglican Parish of Whangaparaoa Peninsula
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Sermon

Prisoners of Hope

Zechariah 9:9-12 ; Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30

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Well, there's no pleasing some people, is there? No matter what you do, it will not be enough. It won't be correct. Or it will be wrong in some way or other. Something will always be wrong. And that's exactly what is happening in the chapter that we've just read from Matthew. Here is our Lord looking at the ministry of John the Baptist and his own ministry. One came as a prophet, bringing a strict message, dressed in camels' hair, and eating wild honey, living in the desert - and he was called crazy.

And then along comes Jesus and he has the old glass of wine and he enjoys himself with his friends and they call him a glutton and a 'wine-bibber' to use the old language. You can't win no matter what.

Jesus has just in the early part of that chapter, talked about the wonder of John the Baptist. He says, "Here is a man who was sent as one who is my messenger - sent ahead of me to prepare the way for you."

Listen to this: "Truly I tell you among those born of women, no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist." Among all the people that have lived, no one is greater than John the Baptist. He then goes on to say that we are more privileged and the least in the kingdom is greater than John. Amazing statement isn't it! He came as an ascetic; his clothing is out of the ordinary: it's the clothing of a prophet. His message is strict and firm, "Get ready for the coming of God's Messiah, all else."

Contrast that with Jesus. Born to humble people with no political clout or great achievements. He was humble - coming as the conquering King - riding a donkey. In modern terms, he drives a Lada, not a Rolls Royce. He was captivating in his teaching; stern and fierce with the powerful; gentle and understanding with the powerless.

And yet, both John and Jesus were rejected. "We played the flute and you did not dance; we wailed and you did not mourn." And it's no different in their own age or in the ages back. You can read of Martin Luther the great reformer: he will tell us that humankind is very much like a drunken man: he gets onto his horse and he falls off one side, he gets back and falls off the other. It doesn't matter which way you go it's not gonna be good. So we must not expect that it will be different for us. Grow a large church, they'll tell you if you're in it for the money. Enjoy the reality and intimacy of the small church, and they'll say, "You see the decline of religion in this country." Doesn't matter what you do, it's not gonna be right. So how do we respond to this? There is a wonderful phrase in the Old Testament reading for the day. And it intrigued me when I saw it, and it intrigues me still; I don't think I've plumbed the depths of it yet. The phrase is "prisoners of hope." What does it mean?

Zechariah was prophesying when the people of God had come back from 70 years of exile. They had been sent off because of their own sin, but promised by God that the judgment would not last beyond 70 years. They returned to the land which was in ruins and in particular the temple was a pile of rubble. They'd been instructed to rebuild the houses and they do so, but they've also been instructed to rebuild the temple. But houses were needed first. And so they did those and the temple took a backseat and further back seat and further back seat until, in the end, it almost got forgotten. The prophets Zechariah, Haggai and others came along and saying, "Hey we've got to get God's temple done. We can't have it in second place."

And it's so easy to do this, isn't it? A time of prayer - after I've done all my work. I'll begin to tithe after I've paid my bill. I'll go back to church to worship once things have settled down to my life - I'm too busy at the moment. See how it works? God becomes second, rather than first in all that we do. Place him first - ask him to help you, help you to find a way.

Find a way of praying that fits you personally. I happen to be married to a gifted intercessor. And I pray. I would never forget, nor cease to be grateful for, my spiritual director when I went to her and started, talk about my absence of prayer life which is the best way to describe and sadly, and she said her mantra was "Peter, you are not Lorraine".

"Find your way of praying. Lorraine has been commanded of the Lord to pray this way and now you find your way of doing things." So look at the great saints by all means and enjoy them. But, what's your way of praying that God would direct you in. You don't have to copy anyone else. But above all, don't ever relegate God, to second place. It's too easy to do.

Well the section we went through tells of God's judgment, on his enemies, and then afterwards turns into this great paen of praise: a God who is utterly trustworthy, a God who is completely wonderful in all the things that he does; a God who is true to his word.

No wonder Zechariah is given that solid praise, that he begins with. But how will God show he is true to his word how will he figure all this out?

Well, your king will come. Driving a lada; riding on a donkey. This humble figure will come and everything will change, all will begin to be set right again. As for my people, because of the commitment that I have made to you, I will come and set you free from the waterless pit.

I didn't understand the word waterless until we went to Israel. There you see how precious water is - how it must be collected and kept and stored. So a waterless pit is a place of death.

I will come to rescue from the waterless pit in which you have been imprisoned. So return to your fortress. And here's the words "you prisoners of hope". What's the fortress that we hide, what does this "prisoner of hope" mean?

Whatever it means, it won't be easy.

Think back to the first time you became aware of God's presence with you. Can you remember it? The wonder of it? How did he speak to you? What was it like?

Where was God? And how did he speak to you? What was it like?

I can remember waking up in the morning, the day after I had made this commitment to God, which wasn't easily done. I mean it was easily enough done it wasn't very nice: I said, "Okay, God, I will try you out." Which isn't the most humble of ways to come back to the Lord of all creation, but amazingly he receives sinners even like that.

I woke up and said, "God, are you still there?" And he has been right through.

Can you remember one time, when God intervened in your life, in an utterly unmistakable way you knew it had to be him? There will be story after story after story that you haven't told yet. One day, write it down and give it to Ian. And it can be read out if you haven't got the courage to come up and stand up here and it's not easy to do this.

I want to tell you two stories of how God worked in our lives unmistakably.

The first is a story of going to England the first time. Through a series of events, we had been given the opportunity to go to Toronto during the time of the Toronto Blessing for a conference. And as Lorraine prayed about it, she became aware that we were to go on to England, and we would go to a conference there at a place called The Hensol" that was the house where it was held. She rang and asked to attend but they said, "Look, sorry there are no places free, and we never get cancellations."

Now the Lord had said to the Lorraine, "When you ring you will not be able to get in." Then he used words to her which are not in Lorraine's normal vocabulary, "Hang in there, and you will get in."

So the Lorraine rang just before we left to go to Toronto and "Sorry, no Mrs Lloyd, there is nothing here we've booked out." So in great faith after the Toronto conference, when we were ready to get on the aircraft to England, Lorraine said, "Will you call this time?"

So I rang. "Mr Lloyd, we have told your wife we haven't any room; we are full and we never have cancellations." So we got on the aircraft and I was looking forward to a holiday in London where we had not been before.

We were to meet a friend of a friend there who would pick us up and take us to conference and she had rung the night before, and said, "I have the Lloyds, where do I bring them." And they said, "No, no, no. The Lloyds are not coming. So she met us at the airport and said, "What do we do now?"

I said, "If you could just take us home then we can find some accommodation, we'll be right. But she couldn't do that but anyway we got some accommodation. And we when arrived there, it was nine o'clock in the morning after an eight hour flight across the Atlantic.

"Thank you, Mr Lloyd, the zipzap has worked. Your room is booked and it will be ready at two o'clock this afternoon." Five hours to wander around London, which we did and found some marvellous places. Go back to the hotel. Sign in, flake out on the bed and the phone goes. There is no one in the world who knows where we are, except for that one person. No one in the world knows where we are. And I pick up the phone thinking, "I hope this isn't anything serious and you know the zipzap hasn't gone wrong or whatever." Because quite seriously if it had been the Lord Himself saying, "I'm about to return," I would have said to the Lord, "Could you just please pray for a couple of hours, I need some sleep."

Well, it was the leader of the conference, saying they had a cancellation. The night before a sermon had been preached to them at church on perseverance. And they said, "The Lloyds have been so persevering that they went to the church office rummaged around in a wastepaper basket to get the phone number of the lady, who then told them where we were.

And folks, they are stories that happened to other people. Not to us. We're too ordinary.

One more story: There was a time when we were in Christchurch to tinies well under five, and we are about to leave that particular task we were doing and drive up to Auckland to take up a new position. Lorraine's sister and brother-in-law and family were coming over to stay with us for a few days and then we'd all trek up north together. As Lorraine totalled up the bills for that month, it was pretty much equal to our salary. And she sensed the Lord saying, "I want you to pay those bills and trust me. So she said, "I'd better check that out the Pete." And somehow I managed to drag up the faith to say yeah okay, let's do that.

So here we are, faced with two little children and a family coming over to join us. And I think we had just a few cents left I can't remember what it was. The first thing that happened was that a nice neighbour across the road came and said, "Lorraine, I've just had to empty my freezer because we're going on holiday, would some meat help you." Thank you. That's most kind of you. She didn't tell her story of why, she just gave meat to us.

And then, over that month, we were given the whole of a month's salary to us again. So that when the Lorraine's family arrived, there was empty cabinets, but we could go down to the supermarket and fill them up again. Now folks, what happens with stories like that - and you will each have them in your life - there is being woven around you, with, and the only way I can describe it is, gossamer-thin webs a prison of trust, of hope. So that when the going gets tough, you can look back to those things and you live within that prison of hope. It has got no door on it. You are free to step in and stay out, but it will hold you, it will protect you.

John the Baptist said to Jesus, "Are you the one I'm to expect, or should I look for another." John was in prison under threat of death. What Jesus was doing didn't look like what he thought it would be. And Jesus told him what he had done and what he was doing. He said, "Tell John this." And the costs of the threads of hope were built around John so he could trust. He had become a prisoner now, not of Herod, but a prisoner of hope.

And you and I are prisoners in the same way: bound together by all the stories and experiences that we know; let alone the promises of the Bible itself. Let alone the words of Jesus that come to strengthen.

How else can you respond when things really get tough? You are a prisoner captured by His faithfulness. There's no key to the prison. You're free to go. But you know you can't, even though you can. You know you won't. Here is how one songwriter put it:

"Everyone knows there is pain in this life;
We've all seen our share of tears.
But I choose to live on the positive side
And I won't be held hostage by fear.

"I'm a prisoner of hope, bound by my faith
Chained to Your love, locked up in grace.
I'm free to leave but I'll never go
I'm wonderfully, willingly, freely a prisoner of hope.

"Some people doubt what they don't understand
But I know what's true in my heart.
Now I can't control what's out of my hands
But I can lay back in Your arms."

From the Bill Gaither Vocal Band album, "Lovin' Life"