

SERMON: 2017/11/26 (Last Sunday after Pentecost, Year A - Ezk. 34:11-24 & Mt. 25:31-46)_BTR

[Invite the children to sit at the front. Bring out a map of the Middle-East to centre-front.]

Last week we took a large leap forward in time, do you remember?
Almost 170 years: from Joshua's victory to a time of anarchy under the "judges," when everyone did their own selfish thing and *ignored* God. [See Jdgs. 2:6]

But one, *wonderful* woman did listen: Deborah. [Jdgs. 4:4-5]
And yet even she couldn't get all the Israelites to cooperate for very long. [See: Jdgs. 5:31-6:1.]

Fortunately, then came some kings: Saul and David.
And they were o-kay: They finally finished the job of "driving out" the wicked peoples who kept causing trouble in Canaan. [Erase Canaanites etc. from map.]
And life in "the Promised Land" - [draw the boundaries of Israel on the map] - was alright for a while.

But then things got bad again.

Civil war broke out!

David's son Solomon, who was initially famous for his (uncommon) wisdom [1 Kgs. 4:29], started to make some *very* poor choices that *really* annoyed the tribes in the north [n.1], and when *his* son, Rehoboam, came along, they said, "*We've had enough!* We're tired of being ruled by soft southerners: we're going to elect our own leader."

And Israel was divided into two, *weak* kingdoms. [Draw line through the middle of Israel on the map.]

So, soon after that, the northern one was "gobbled up(!)" up by a "hungry" empire from the east called, "the Assyrians."

[Write 'Assur' on the map (in northern Iraq).]

The remaining Israelites lived in the south in a region called "Judea," (which is why today we call them "Jews").

But the Assyrians were soon defeated themselves by an internal enemy that they had made, the "Babylonians."

[Write 'Babylon' on the map (in southern Iraq).]

And they conquered *all* of what's known as "the Fertile Crescent"! [Wave over the map.]

Whew!

That was a *much* bigger leap.

We just covered about *500* years of history!

And it made me hungry!

But don't worry!

I've brought some "Thanksgiving" leftovers with me. [Bring out a pie.]

Yummy! One of my favourites.

Should I share it?

[Wait for a reply from the children.]

Okay, then.

[Cut the pie into a few slices, keeping most of it for myself.]

What's wrong?

Don't you think it is right that I have the largest one?

Isn't that good sharing?

No?

Why not?

[Wait for an answer.]

Ah! I see. You're complaining about the "fairness" of my actions; you're questioning their "justice."

Then let's pray: Father God, we pray that you would give us the wisdom to know what justice is - Your justice, and then to put it into practice in our own lives, in Jesus' name we pray, amen.

[Ask the children to leave.]

Rebekah and I had a - rare - "date night" this week, during our visit to Iowa:

We went to see the new 'Justice League' movie.

Maybe you've seen the trailers?

Well, "spoiler alert" - I won't give away any specific details, although most of you probably have the better sense to not bother with such claptrap anyway, but the thrust of the story is simple and it is this: a *big*, bad alien "dude" with lots and lots of scary henchmen from a different world invades Earth with the intention of forcing humankind to become the (miserable) slaves of his faraway overlord.

And whilst this sounds far-fetched, it is actually a pretty accurate description of the background for our Old Testament reading from the book, *Ezekiel!*

Ezekiel the prophet, of course, an Israelite, offered his supernaturally-inspired orations not in his homeland but over there in *Babylon*, where he was an exile [gesture to map]; a prisoner.

He got here - along with a few others, all rich, educated, influential Jews, like 'Jehoiachin [the king]..., the king's mother, his wives, his officials and the prominent people of the land', as the author of 2 Kings puts it [24:15] - because they had been dragged, in chains from Jerusalem.

She - Zion(!) - still stood.

Unmolested too, more-or-less.

But all around about her - in the countryside - were garrisoned thousands or crack *Babylonian* soldiers: ruthless, well-trained foreigners; *far* superior in every way to the locals, the Judeans, who were being permitted to go about their business, but only under close supervision; and heavily, *heavily* taxed.

If it helps, picture France under the Nazis:

The gay cafes were still open, you could still buy a baguette or some cigarettes, the man at the top - in the Palais de l'Élysée - was your countryman - but you were *definitely* not free. The army had been *dis*-armed and *dis*-banded, large public gatherings were prohibited, and even the *slightest* insolence was *immediately* quashed by impromptu, on-the-spot executions of not just the perceived perpetrator, but of his family and neighbours too.

And the person behind all of this - pulling the strings - was the imperial despot, Nebuchadnezzar the II [tap 'Babylon' on the map], whose world would've seemed *very* alien and intimidating to Ezekiel:

It was a *huge*, sprawling, multicultural city, *beautifully* decorated in glazed blue tiles; full of lush gardens and statuary and cutting-edge canals; and everywhere stood ziggurats! *Massive* stepped pyramids reaching up to the clouds like the legendary Tower of Babel.

In comparison, Jerusalem - of which the Psalmist was so proud, and spends many verses in rapturous descriptions [see, e.g.: 48:2-3,12-13] - was a pale reflection indeed: a parochial backwater, it was at its greatest extent smaller than McMinnville [n.2]; impressive *only* to the tent-dwelling goat-herders who composed most of the remaining populace.

And could this situation get any worse?

You bet.

At least a (puppet) Jewish state still existed in the land God set aside for it. Without a team of superheroes to protect it, the Babylonians could easily, on a whim, obliterate it altogether. They certainly had the reach and the "fire-power" to do so. Or rather, the "bow-and-arrow" -power to do so. Their army was *vast!* And experienced.

And *at least* there was still a "Davidic" king, Zedekiah [1 Chron. 3:15], on the

throne.

A spineless, *traitorous* weasel, sure.

But a legitimate heir.

And we could give up all hope, and beat our chests, and look for scapegoats, and wallow in self-pity, *or(!)*, says Ezekiel, we could use our exile to “get real” with ourselves; to ask some hard questions about where we might have gone wrong.

And why does he do this?

Because you can imagine how those exiles reacted to their fate:

“It’s not fair. We don’t deserve this. I’m not to blame. Why am I being punished?”

And Ezekiel, says “*Rubbish!*”

You’re not innocent.

And remember who he is prophesying to: not the hoi polloi. But the privileged. The fortunate, whose wealth and learning were the very criteria used to entrap them.

Then he “hits” them with this jaw-dropping line, straight from God’s “mouth:”
‘The fat and strong I will destroy. I will feed them justice.’ [Ezk. 34:16]

It sounds like something the Dark Knight would say: the menacing threat made against a greasy, smug mafioso by an indignant vigilante, rising up on behalf of “the people” - those who’ve been extorted; those who’ve been left behind by so-called “progress,” those who are neglected, over-looked, derided and “*forgotten.*” [n.3].

And it exposes an uncomfortable truth about being “well to do” - about those who can enjoy comfort and “standing,” and that’s that their accumulation in *any* place represents a failure to spread those things around (more evenly), which is hard to hear for us in the extraordinarily affluent West.

But not untrue.

Logical, really:

There’s only so much of (physical goods like) “x” and “y,” and if I’ve got lots of them then somebody else must have less.

And is that just?

Now that’s a question!

But God calls on His people in every age to “love justice” [see, e.g.: Amos 5:25; and the Gospel passage allocated for this day: Mt. 25:31-46], and so this is Ezekiel’s challenge to us today.

Amen.

Let's reflect.

Footnotes:

1. See: Vasantharao, Chilkuri (2003), 'The Division of the Kingdom: Its Causes and Consequences', *IJT*, Volume 45, Nos. 1 & 2, pp. 41-51, available at https://biblicalstudies.org.uk/pdf/ijt/45_041.pdf (accessed November 23, 2017); or, Brindle, Wayne (July 1984), 'The Causes of the Division of Israel's Kingdom', *Bibliotheca Sacra*, pp. 223-233.
2. See: Finkelstein, Israel and Silberman, Neil Asher (2007), *David and Solomon: In Search of the Bible's Sacred Kings and the Roots of the Western Tradition*, New York, N. Y.: Free Press (Simon & Schuster, Inc.), 129.
3. "The Forgotten" - a ref. to one of Trump's catchphrases: see - <http://www.msnbc.com/msnbc-quick-cuts/watch/trump-the-forgotten-men-and-women-forgotten-no-longer-804468291925>.