

“Rain, Repentance & Renewal”

24 April 2022 - Led by Andrew Whiteside

Welcome & Call to Worship

Hymn of Preparation: IPH 371 Child of Blessing, Child of Promise

Prayers of Adoration & Confession

Reading: Ezra 10:1-17

Sermon:

I. Rain

*“I, the Lord of snow and rain,
I have borne my people’s pain.”*

Familiar words from Daniel Schutte’s hymn *I, the Lord of sea and sky*. You probably think that it’s just a couplet constructed around convenient rhyme.

You’ll probably know about the rain trope in film. It can mean different things (sadness and renewal are two possibilities) but filmmakers often use rain to signal an intense moment in the film. The one that springs to mind is the downpour in *Shine* when the concert pianist David Helfgott is running through a downpour and stumbles across a wine bar. He’s recovering from a mental breakdown and that’s the place where he shows his talent in public for the first time since his breakdown.

Our Bible reading this morning is also set in the context of rain. In Verse 9, we read that “all the people were sitting in the square before the house of God, greatly distressed by the occasion and because of the rain.” The two factors go hand in hand. This is an intense moment and they’re getting wet. An obvious element of the rain trope in cinema is that raindrops are the equivalent of teardrops.

In this context, the tears are those of the people. Verse 1 tells us that not only was Ezra “praying and confessing, weeping and throwing himself down before the house of God” but a large crowd of Israelites — men, women and children — gathered around him” and “they too wept bitterly.”

Tears of the prophet, tears of the people. Who else was crying? The next two lines of that verse of Schutte’s hymns remind us.

*“I have wept for love of them.
They turn away.”*

Bishop Edward Darling in his notes on Ireland’s Anglican hymnal explains that “They turn away” is a direct reference to the abandonment of Jesus immediately after his arrest. “Then everyone deserted him and fled.” (Mark 14:50)

We also know, however, that it describes a pattern of abandonment described elsewhere in the Bible. For example, Hosea 11:7 reads “My people are determined to turn from me.”

II. The Easter story

This intense moment speaks into the Easter story — the disciples who had abandoned Jesus as he was put to death; the people who disobey God’s instructions for our lives; the God who loves those people. There are tears all round. It’s easy to get carried away with the joy of the Easter story but we have to be aware of the tears too.

Matthew reports that when Peter, one of Jesus’s staunchest supporters, realised that he had vociferously denied knowing Jesus, he went outside and wept bitterly. (Matthew 26:75) Luke tells us that when he went to the empty tomb, “he went away, wondering to himself what had happened.” (Luke 24:12). So shaken was he by what he had done, he wasn’t sure where he stood. Perhaps Peter was rediscovering his confidence by the time he has a one-to-one with Jesus. Jesus repeatedly asks him, “Do you love me?”

John records that Peter was hurt when he was asked the same question a third time. You can just imagine the tears of frustration and humiliation welling up. What’s intended, however, isn’t humiliation but an opportunity of renewal. Peter had denied Christ three times and so he could likewise express his devotion to Christ three times. The renewal of Peter is an essential step toward the ministry of the early Church at Pentecost. Note the prerequisite prayerful preparation for the coming of the Holy Spirit (Acts 1:14). We can interpret that Ezra did much the same preparation (Ezra 10:6). An essential response for everyone to make at Easter is found in Shekariah’s words in today’s reading: “We have been unfaithful to our God.”

II. Recognising our unfaithfulness and seeking renewal

Peter preaches to the crowd and tells them that they crucified Jesus (Acts 2:36). They have been unfaithful. We read that the people’s response was probably tearful (they were “cut to the heart”) and they asked what they should do. Peter tells them to repent and be baptised. Likewise, he warned the people to “save themselves” from that “corrupt generation”. Compare that with Ezra 9:10 — “a land polluted by the corruption of its peoples”. Just as Ezra made it clear that the people need to set themselves apart in obedience to God. Peter preached a similar message.

Knowing his own unfaithfulness toward God, Peter preaches another public sermon soon after Pentecost and again points out how the people had rejected Jesus. “You disowned the Holy and Righteous One. You killed the author of life.” (Acts 3:14-15) Again the solution is to repent; to turn to God so that sins may be wiped out; so that times of refreshing may come from the Lord. (Acts 3:19)

In his book *Living the Resurrection*, Eugene Peterson explains that living the resurrection “requires living in company with men and women whom Jesus calls to follow him” (that corporate faithfulness is common to Ezra 10 and Acts 1-3). Underpinning that, Peterson

writes, is “holy baptism”. It is “the focal practice of the resurrection community that once and for all tells us who we are [our identity] in the company we seek as we follow Jesus.” Last week, Sam helpfully identified baptism as one of the purposes of disciples of Christ; of those who are being disciplined and taught the way of Christ.

Peterson reminds us of the two basic commands of baptism — repent and follow. We renounce self-initiative for Jesus-obedience. We renounce clamouring assertions and replace them with quiet listening.

The beginning of the journey of faith towards God is not a private, personal affair. Peterson tells us that “it is always done with the assent, participation and affirmation of a company of faithful men and women”. Here we might think of another purpose of disciples that Sam spoke of on Easter Day. Disciples teach people to obey everything that Jesus has commanded. As followers of Christ, we might come to church here to be taught but each of us also has a role in teaching others in this place what we have learnt of the way of Christ.

In holy baptism, Peterson emphasises, “our lives are defined by resurrection. We know and are known by knowing and being known by the living Jesus Christ. This is where we begin.” He challenges us to revisit that truth every day of our lives, remembering on a daily basis that we’ve renounced self-initiative for trustful obedience.

In Israel, there were two key rainy periods in the agricultural years. The early rain came in the autumn. It softened the ground that had been hardened by the hot summer and enabled farmers to plough and then to plant their seeds. The Pentecost — the coming of the Holy Spirit into the group of disciples — was the early rain. It’s an intense moment of renewal. From there, the seeds will be sown and there will be growth in the Church.

This Easter we remind ourselves that the Lord of snow and rain has borne his people’s pain. He has wept for love of them. They turned away. He has broken their hearts of stone, given them hearts for love alone. This Easter may we respond to Ezra’s call to repent of our unfaithfulness. Let us honour the Lord and do his will. Amen.

Praise: IPH 541 Here I Am, Lord

Announcements

Prayers for Others

Closing Hymn: IPH 668 Salvation Belongs to Our God

Benediction