

**Pentecost 12**  
**23/8/2020**

**Mark the Evangelist**

**Ezekiel 1-4, 30-32**  
**2 Corinthians 3:1-6**  
**Matthew 16:13-20**

**The challenge and comfort of the closeness of God**

Sermon preached by Matt Julius

---

*God, may my words be loving and true; and may those who listen discern what is not.  
Amen.*

A friend of mine recently commented that, in the present circumstances, he was feeling a palpable sense of living through history. Of course we are always living through history in varying ways: our personal histories, family and local histories, and even taking our part in world history. In part accelerated by increased connectivity between all parts of the world, we are constantly aware that there is always something of significance going on somewhere at any given moment. We seem far removed from the BBC news broadcast in 1930 which was forced to end 10 minutes early because there was nothing newsworthy left to report.

This palpable sense of living through history, however, points to the present context of a once in a century pandemic. It feels like we are not simply passing idly through time, but are experiencing the sort of thing that will be recorded in history books, and studied by future generations. The kind of event which in the past has prompted the question, “where were you when ...?” The key difference being we will all know the almost universal answer: at home.

This sense that the road of history has come up to meet us, and here we are compelled to journey through it, seems akin to the feeling the prophet Ezekiel is seeking to evoke in our reading today from chapter 18.

Throughout the prophetic utterances of Ezekiel we hear, often with stark imagery and detail, about the judgement due to the people of Israel, and the nations around. Spoken into the context of exile, when God’s people were taken from their land and subjugated, Ezekiel’s prophecies interpret this experience of suffering and dispossession as the result of divine judgement. This judgement is due because of the idolatry and sinfulness of the Israelites: their unfaithfulness to God’s holiness and God’s commands.

As we read through Ezekiel, any notion that the Israelites can be a people apart from God is definitively rejected. They cannot make of themselves what they like. The Israelites cannot fashion their devotion, their common life, or their identity in whatever manner they see fit. The call of God comes relentlessly through Ezekiel: the Israelites are God’s people because they belong to *God*. They are God’s people because they were called out of Egypt, because they were formed into a people by the law, because they were known by God. There can be no self-reliance, no sense of a people persisting through history apart from the God who has formed them, and sustains them. Ezekiel makes clear the condemnation for Israel’s departure from God, and the judgement which follows from their infidelity.

In one sense, Ezekiel 18 might be construed as a sort of relief from the unceasing judgement of previous chapters. In this text the focus shifts from the broad sweep of geo-political change: the Babylonians rising as an agent of divine retribution against Israel; the history of God's people narrated against the drama of God's long-standing faithfulness to unfaithful Israel. In chapter 18 the story becomes, in an odd way, intimate. The striking images of winged beasts, and executioners, and desolate temples, give way to stories of parent and child.

"Know that all lives are mine," says the Lord, "the life of the parent as well as the life of the child is mine ..."

Against all that has been said about the grand sweep of history here Ezekiel lays out that while the whole world is held in God's hand, so too is every life. The life of the parent, as well as the life of the child. The God who is Lord over the rise and fall of nations is portrayed here as also incredibly close.

It is tempting to hear in these words a comfort against the backdrop of crisis and exile. God holds each of us, owns each of us, keeps us: every one. Perhaps, after all, everything will be okay.

Yet, in the midst of crisis the closeness of God can rather feel, not like a comfort, but like a cold and bitter challenge. The God who is close cannot plead ignorance, or that we are collateral damage. God holds every life, and yet ... the city is destroyed. The people are dragged away from their homes - or locked within them. Many of these lives perish. Far from easing the burden of God's judgement, this reflection on the closeness of God can make this judgement feel even more acute.

The received wisdom, which might have helped us through the crisis, must be set aside. As the proverb says, "The parents have eaten sour grapes, and the children's teeth are set on edge." Perhaps it isn't us: our forebears were unfaithful, and so we are only bearing the consequence of their actions. While it is true that we are suffering, perhaps after all, we are not the direct targets of God's judgement. This was not merely the conventional wisdom, but the law. The law sets out that the iniquity of parents will be born by their children, "to the third and fourth generation of those who reject God." (Deut. 5.9)

Ezekiel challenges this wisdom, and even this law. Through this chapter Ezekiel sets out the story of a parent, and a child, and their child: three generations. The Grandparent is righteous, and so shall live; their unrighteous child shall die for their own sins; and the righteous grandchild shall live, despite the sins of their father. The point Ezekiel is making is not about locating the reader as an individual in the midst of the crowd. As if what mattered was who exactly is at fault for an entire nation being cast aside and dispossessed of its land. Rather, Ezekiel is locating the reader as the focal point of history: it is *this* generation which is experiencing the judgement of God, it is *this* generation who is responsible for turning back in faithfulness, it is *you* : now, dislocated in exile: you are the ones who must walk towards righteousness and life, and away from guilt and death. The road of history has come up to meet you. The responsibility we find here is not the responsibility of blame for what has happened, but the responsibility for acting now in order to shape the life which might arise out of the present circumstances.

Ezekiel's prophetic address is perhaps not so far away for those of us in the present circumstances, with a palpable sense of living through history. What matters is not who is to blame, but that we (all of us): now, dislocated in our homes: we are the ones who must walk towards righteousness and life, and away from guilt and death. The road of history has come up to meet us. God has come close.

The comfort of God's closeness cannot be heard without first hearing the seriousness of this responsibility. We are called to respond, called to be concerned with the oppression of the poor and the needy, called to give food to the hungry, to exact true justice, and adhere to the ways of the Lord. Let us cast away a narrow focus on ourselves, and step into the moment which has come to us.

The echo of Ezekiel can be heard saying: God comes to us in this moment, and calls us to respond. This is a serious responsibility.

But let us be clear: God *does* come to us in this moment; and *does* call us, that we would respond. The responsibility is great, and also a sure sign of God's closeness in the midst of crisis. We must not think that God is only a figment of history, or that God is always to come. God is close to us even now. And though it is as much a challenge as a comfort, it *is* a comfort. Because God seeks for us a renewal in this moment: a new heart and a new spirit. God desires for us to meet this moment and turn in faithfulness and live. God desires us, yearns for us. As a mother yearns for their daughter, and desires that they would grow into goodness. God takes no pleasure in death and suffering, but calls and beckons us - evermore, even now - to come close to God as God has come close to us.

What it means for God to hold the whole world in God's hand, all of history, and each of us, is not a simple accounting of rights and wrongs. But is a yearning to be bound to us, and us bound to God; a desire that we should turn and be transformed, renewed not by wisdom and law, but by a new Spirit of the living God. In the midst of chaos, uncertainty, and what feels like the crisis of divine judgement, Ezekiel reminds us that God does not cast us down from afar, but turns the divine eyes of life towards us.

May we embrace the God who comes embraces us, yearning with God for the life of the world.

Come Holy Spirit. Come.

Amen.

\*\*\*