

SERMON – EVENSONG 13TH SEPTEMBER

Ezekiel 20:1-8;33-44 Acts 20:17-end

IN THE NAME OF THE FATHER, SON AND HOLY SPIRIT. AMEN

There is something rather poignant about both of our readings this evening. They are, in different ways, readings about **memory**.

In Ezekiel, God asks Israel to remember its history: to remember where it has come from, to remember its repeated failures, and above all to remember the extraordinary faithfulness of God.

And in Acts, Paul gathers the elders of the church at Ephesus and asks them to remember. He knows that he will probably never see them again. He looks back over his ministry among them, and then entrusts them — and the Church — to God.

Both readings ask, in effect: **What happens when the people of God remember who they are, and whose they are?**

The passage from Ezekiel is not comfortable reading.

Some of the elders of Israel come to the prophet seeking a word from God. But instead of giving them the reassurance they perhaps expected, God confronts them with their history. God reminds them of the Exodus, of the promise made to Israel, and of the command:

“Cast away the detestable things your eyes feast on.”

But Israel would not listen.

“They rebelled against me,” God says.

And the story that follows is one of repeated rebellion. God gives, Israel turns away. God calls, Israel refuses. God remains faithful, Israel wanders.

It would be easy to read that simply as a story about people long ago. But Scripture rarely allows us that comfortable distance. Because Israel's story is also, in some sense, our story. We too know what it is to receive the goodness of God and then forget the giver. We know what it is to promise faithfulness and then discover how easily other loyalties take over.

We know what it is to construct idols. We may not bow down before carved images, but there are plenty of things which can quietly demand our

allegiance: reputation, money, success, security, status, even our own insistence upon being right.

The remarkable thing about Ezekiel 20, however, is that the story is not ultimately about Israel's unfaithfulness. It is about **God's faithfulness**.

Again and again God says that he acts:

“for the sake of my name.”

That phrase can sound rather strange to modern ears, as though God were concerned about his reputation. But something deeper is being said. God's name represents God's character. God remains faithful because faithfulness is who God is. Israel's hope does not rest upon Israel finally managing to become good enough. It rests upon the character of God.

And that becomes especially clear towards the end of our passage. God promises to gather his people, to restore them and to bring them home.

“You shall know that I am the LORD, when I deal with you for my name’s sake.”

Not according to what they deserve. Not according to their failures. But according to God's mercy. That is extraordinarily close to the heart of the Gospel. Our relationship with God begins not with our achievement but with God's grace.

And it is perhaps with that thought in mind that we should hear Paul's farewell speech in Acts. Paul summons the elders of the church at Ephesus. He knows what lies ahead. He says:

“I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there.”

Except that he does know one thing.

“The Holy Spirit testifies to me,” he says, “that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting for me.”

Yet still Paul goes. Christian faithfulness does not mean knowing exactly what the future holds. It means knowing **whom we trust with the future**. Paul cannot see the road ahead. But he knows to whom he belongs. Thus he can say:

“I do not count my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish my course.”

For Paul, life finds its meaning in faithfulness to Christ. And then his attention turns from himself to those who will remain behind. He says:

“Keep watch over yourselves and over all the flock.”

It is a lesson for all of us. Before we can take care of anyone, we first have to take care of ourselves. Christian leadership is never simply about managing other people. It begins with allowing God continually to shape us.

“Keep watch over yourselves.”

Our prayer life. Our motivations. Our resentments. Our ambitions. The places where we are becoming tired or cynical. The things we would prefer God not to examine too closely. Because the shepherd who stops listening to the Shepherd will eventually lose the way. Paul then warns that difficulties will come.

“Savage wolves,” he says, will threaten the flock.

Even from within the Christian community distortion may arise. Paul is remarkably realistic about the Church. He does not imagine that Christian communities will automatically be harmonious simply because they are Christian. The Church is a community of grace precisely because it is made up of people who need grace. And yet Paul's final response is not anxiety.

It is trust.

“And now I commend you to God and to the message of his grace.”

Paul has spent years teaching these people. He loves them. They kneel together on the beach and pray. They weep because they know they will probably never see him again. But Paul knows that ultimately the Church does not belong to him. It belongs to God. The future of the Gospel does not depend entirely upon Paul's strength, Paul's wisdom or Paul's leadership. And it doesn't depend on ours. We are called to faithfulness, certainly. We are called to vigilance. We are called to generosity. We are called to care for one another.

But the Church, the Church belongs to Christ.

And perhaps these two readings leave us with a very simple question this evening:

Whose are we?

If we imagine that everything depends upon us, we will eventually become either proud when things go well or despairing when they do not. But if we

remember that we belong to God, something changes. We can repent when we fail, because God's mercy is greater than our failure. We can face uncertainty, because God is already present in the future we cannot see. We can serve others without constantly measuring what we receive in return.

And perhaps that is why Paul ends with the words of Jesus:

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.”

The Christian life is ultimately a life received from God and then given away.

Grace received. Grace shared. Love received. Love offered. Forgiveness received. Forgiveness extended.

And so, like Israel, we are called to remember the God who has remained faithful even when we have wandered. Like the Ephesian elders, we are called to watch over ourselves and those entrusted to us. And like Paul, we are called to place the future where it has always belonged: in the hands of God.

For the deepest security of the Church is not that we shall never fail.

It is that God remains faithful.

And therefore, whatever lies ahead, we may commend ourselves, one another, and the whole Church

“to God and to the message of his grace.”

Amen.