

TEAM SPIRIT IN TEAM JESUS

Hello again from lockdown

I was at the dental hygienist on Wednesday, now that's a personal service!- and allowed to continue?. To look after your teeth you have to love your gums. If they bleed you are not doing it right. My teeth are not my best feature. Daughter Anna showed my metal fillings to her kids to scare them toward the tooth brush. I got a pep talk about using tee-pee interdental brushes.

Pam Ayres rhymed...

Oh, I wish I'd looked after me teeth,
And spotted the perils beneath,
All the toffees I chewed,
And the sweet sticky food,
Oh, I wish I'd looked after me teeth....

If I'd known I was paving the way,
To cavities, caps and decay,
The murder of fillin's
Injections and drillin's
I'd have thrown all me sherbet away.

For our teeth it is true that, "If one part suffers, every part suffers with it" as Paul wrote to the Corinthians; true for our gums that, "those parts of the body that seem to be weaker are indispensable"; and what can we say about, "the parts that are unpresentable which we treat with special modesty." Perhaps not in the jokey chat of 3 to 7 year old boys. (All you parents of young children who are at home in lockdown –sympathy!)

Our society has discovered that lots of the essential workers are not the frontline ones but the delivery drivers, care assistants, police officers, trades and maintenance people, shop workers. It is modern parable just like that body of Christ image.



Paul's purpose in using the image of the body and its parts for the church was, "...that there should be no division in the body, but that its parts should have equal concern for each other." Peter, our Peter, not the apostle, encouraged us last week that: (1) every member joined to Jesus has a vital role (2) every member needs the others and (3) the one indispensable ingredient is love.

He finished with two lines from Zechariah about how Israel was to be restored after exile in Babylon, 'not by might nor by power but by my Spirit, says the LORD' and, 'despise not the day of small things.'

The Assyrians colonized them, destroyed Jerusalem in 587 BC and plundered the best of their people, treasures and produce. Nebuchadnezzar settled other people in their land. They became a minority group in Babylon and their former homeland. Then the Persians took over the empire after about 50 years and allowed some Jews to return.

The 'day of small things' was the small start made to the new temple in Jerusalem, compared with the former temple and huge kingdom of Solomon. The 'might and power' now belonged to Cyrus the Great. But the Spirit who would energize a powerless people was the Holy Spirit of God.

Why is this important and relevant for us? How does the story of exile and restoration inspire us in following Jesus and being members of his body in the 2020's? Three reasons:

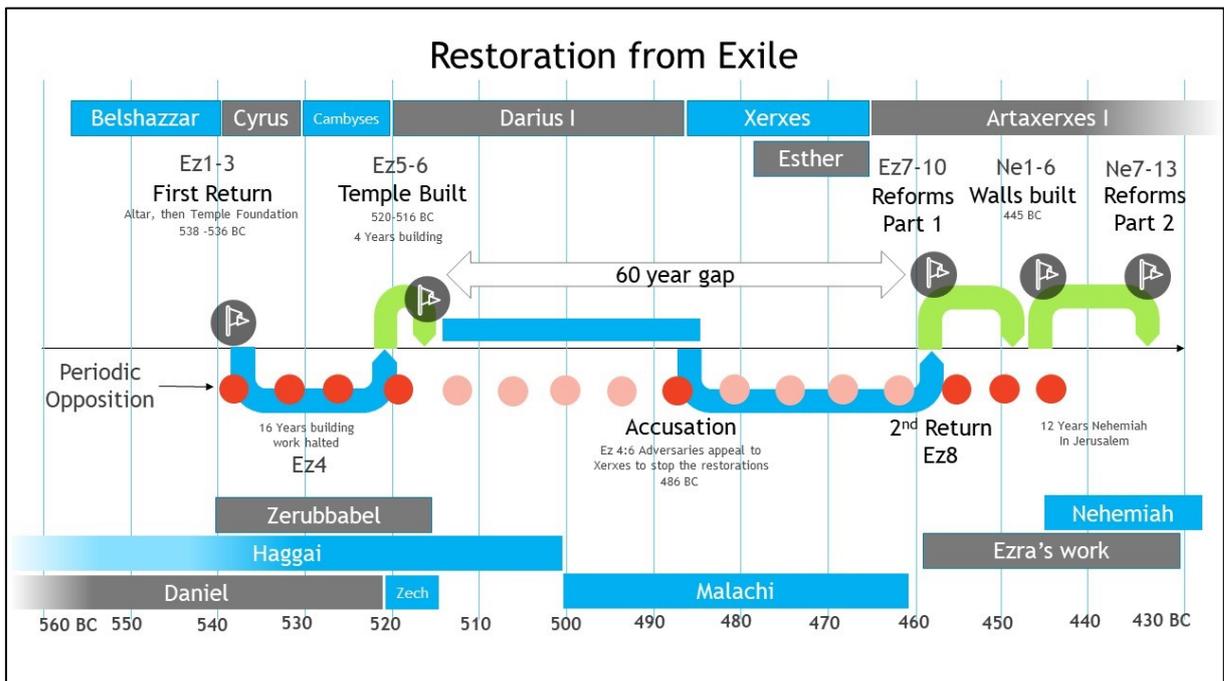
1 The Jews were in the middle of a pluralist society and wider world in which they were a minority, scattered people, struggling to be loyal to their Yahweh God, proclaimed to be God Almighty but seen as one among many. An option. A lifestyle choice. Just like us. Post-Christendom.

2 The returnees' struggle to rebuild a temple, city and community, was achieved through set-backs and successes, opposition and inspiration, grievous disappointments and whoops of joy. Just like us in Kings Church. Just like many of our life stories.

3, we see the emergence of a new team-work and leadership among the returnees; a humility and cooperation not seen in the time of the Kings of Israel. This is relevant to the every-member ministry which the Spirit of God is stirring in us.

Derek Kidner wrote about Israel in exile, "...she emerged no longer a kingdom but a little flock with the makings of a church." Many think of the Jesus Movement in contrast to Judaism. But also- the church drew sap from Jewish roots, especially from the period after exile. We discover there much to guide and inspire us to be good church and live loyally to Jesus.

Let me tell you where we are going. I will give you an overview of the post-exile timeline, read from Ezra and tell you two ways in which God's Team Spirit moves and joins his diverse people in a team, to work together toward his purposes.



Woah! There is a lot in this chart! And before I lose you, let me say that a secret of sucking the goodness and meaning from the Scriptures that there is as much good stuff to be understood in overview as in the detail. Satellite view as well as street view. It is very faith-keeping to know that our 'day of small things' is part of a saga going somewhere because we see where it has been!

There are 130 years in ten-year intervals along the bottom counting down toward the birth of Christ.

The reigns of the kings of Persia are along the top, starting when Cyrus defeated Belshazzar in 539 BC, after the famous 'writing was on the wall' of his dining hall one night.

God's notable servants are along the bottom, prophets and others.

The main events of the Restoration are in two periods with a 60 year gap. It took the first returned exiles 24 years to build a new temple. External opposition, inner discouragement and distracted priorities all delayed the work. Local residents campaigned against the returners. The red dots represent the regular opposition against the building work. But they got there, helped by the encouragement of Haggai and Zechariah speaking God's message to them.

For 60 years the city walls continued in ruins. With each change of Persian king, the locals wrote asking them to refuse permission for the redevelopment.

So far that is in Ezra 1 to 6.

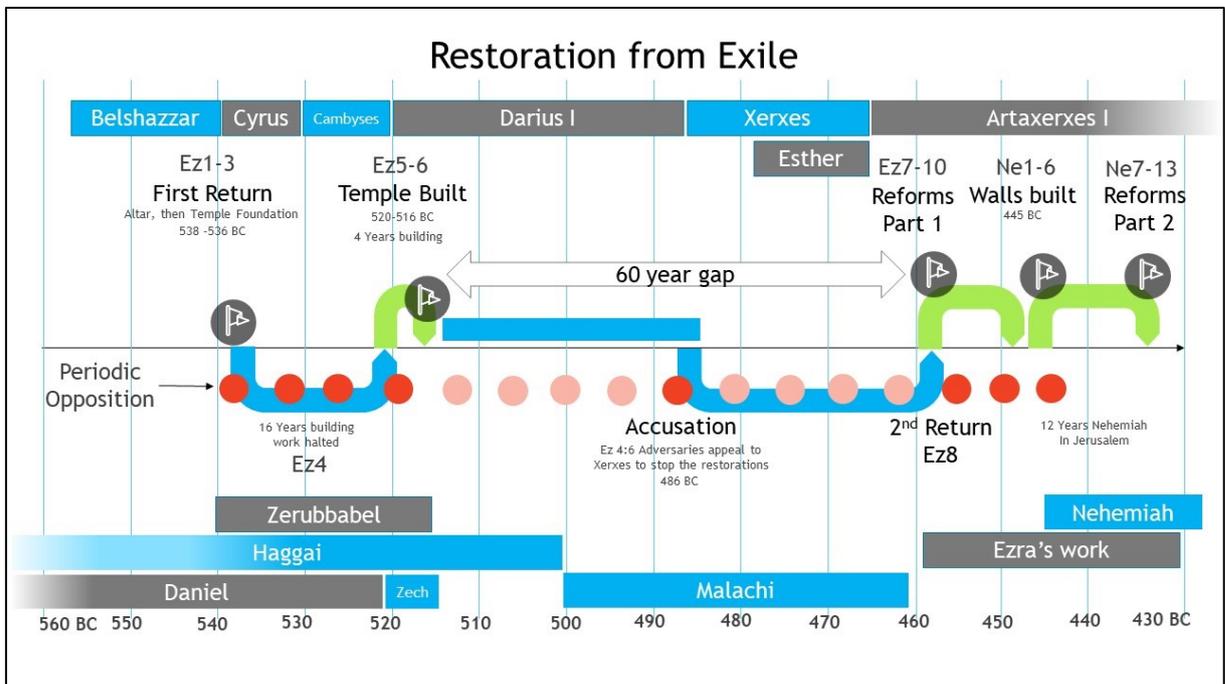
In the meantime Malachi's message highlighted the issues weakening Israel's spiritual life- not believing God's love, not offering their best to God, not listening to his words or keeping their own including to their wives, not dealing justly and generously with everyone.

Meanwhile, back in Persia, Genocide of the Jews remaining in the Empire was averted by Esther and Mordecai.

Then, on the right, the second breakthrough happened 60 years after the temple was built, when Artaxexes sent Ezra to teach the Law of God, to improve the worship practices and beautify the temple using a huge grant of money. He led a second wave of returnees That is Ezra 7 to 10.

Then we come to Nehemiah, a Jewish official for Artaxexes. He hears that the resettlement mission of a previous generation is in 'great trouble and shame' and the city walls still in ruins. He asks to be sent with a work party and building supplies. Against further plots and opposition he project -manages a fast operation to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem in just 52 days- and more – he oversees with Ezra the teacher and Eliashib the chief priest as in a leadership team, the morale-building, spiritual reformation of the people.

The record finishes with the dedication of the walls with two choirs walking around and joining up at the temple, and the appointment of those dedicated to keeping the temple and its services.



The satellite view of this hundred years shows that our God of the ages can cope with set-backs and opposition, he is patient with imperfection in his people, he arranges empires and governments to suit his purpose, he brings low and raises up, he brings times of renewal and reform. It shows the critical importance for the people of God of loyal faith in action, becoming people of the book, of personally going with the flow of God's purpose in our world.

In the last part of our time I will read some of the Bible text and look out for two aspects of God's Team spirit at work in the people who do his work.

EZRA 1:1- 5 [NIV]

"In the first year of Cyrus king of Persia, in order to fulfil the word of the Lord spoken by Jeremiah, the Lord moved the heart of Cyrus king of Persia to make a proclamation throughout his realm and also to put it in writing:

"This is what Cyrus king of Persia says:

"The LORD, the God of heaven, has given me all the kingdoms of the earth and he has appointed me to build a temple for him at Jerusalem in Judah. Any of his people among you may go up to Jerusalem in Judah and build the temple of the Lord, the God of Israel, the God who is in Jerusalem, and may their God be with them. And in any locality where survivors may now be living, the people are to provide them with silver and gold, with goods and livestock, and with freewill offerings for the temple of God in Jerusalem.

Then the family heads of Judah and Benjamin, and the priests and Levites—everyone whose heart God had moved—prepared to go up and build the house of the LORD in Jerusalem."

1 GOD'S TEAM SPIRIT MOVES HEARTS

There was the offer of a large grant and the king's blessing but the change of life was radical. They had to leave all they had known, most of them born in exile and well settled, trek a thousand miles over four months, to an empty, burnt out city, to start over among hostile people who had for 50 years taken over the farms and the houses their grandparents were forced to leave.

It took a heart- one inspired by holy dissatisfaction with life in Babylon where they could not worship God as they should, a heart of vision for the more that could be, a heart to make sacrifices, take risk, delay gratification, give funds, a heart of faith and one with others of the same heart. That most important of preparations- a heart moved by the Spirit of God.

Are we responsible to be moved, or excused if we are not as in the phrase, 'if the Spirit moves me'; or are we deliberately to bring ourselves to the stimulus of God's word and worship, to seek to be moved in heart by God's Spirit? Eph 5:18 urges us:

"Be filled with the Spirit as you speak to one another in psalms and hymns and spiritual songs and make melody in your heart to the LORD."

Heb 3:12 says

"See to it, brothers and sisters, that none of you has a sinful, unbelieving heart that turns away from the living God."

It seems we have not the excuse of being unmoved by the Spirit of God as if it is a divine choice. We can open our core motivations to be moved by Him.

It is said of Ezra in ch 7 v 10

"For Ezra had set his heart to study the Law of the LORD, and to do it and to teach his statutes and rules in Israel."

He set his heart.

Notice one other remarkable thing in verse 1. The Spirit of God who moved the hearts of his people also moved the heart of a dictator, with his mixed beliefs and selfish reasons. Twice more, with Darius and Artaxerxes the Lord did the same.

We can let our hearts be moved by God because he promises to respond when we seek him but also God can decide to move within an unbelieving, even powerful person to contribute to his purposes.

I think some people in the USA thought they had a Cyrus in their president but perhaps they got a Belshazzar with the writing on the wall reading, 'weighed in the balances and found wanting' and 'God has numbered the days of your reign'.

2 GOD'S TEAM SPIRIT GIVES DIVERSE ABILITIES AND ROLES

Let's zoom in on another few verses.

Turning to Ezra 5:1-2

"Now Haggai the prophet and Zechariah the prophet, a descendant of Iddo, prophesied to the Jews in Judah and Jerusalem in the name of the God of Israel, who was over them. ² Then Zerubbabel son of Shealtiel and Joshua son of Jozadak set to work to rebuild the house of God in Jerusalem. And the prophets of God were with them, supporting them.

We have what the prophets said. Haggai was older and very concrete and direct in style and content. Zechariah was younger, visual in his imagery and imagined far into the future. They appear complementary and unlike the reception by those in power for former prophets, here is teamwork with Zerubbabel the governor-administrator and Joshua the chief priest who are also mentioned side by side many times."

Haggai wrote a letter to the leaders when the temple building had been halted for 16 years saying,

"Is it a time for you yourselves to be living in your panelled houses, while this house remains a ruin?"

He warned that while they put their own affairs first, above the priority for which they had relocated, their work was not productive. Wages went into a bag with holes.

How did they take it? Hagg 1:12

"Then Zerubbabel ... Joshua .. the high priest, and the whole remnant of the people obeyed the voice of the LORD their God and the message of the prophet Haggai, because the LORD their God had sent him. And the people feared the LORD."

Then Haggai, the LORD's messenger, gave this message of the LORD to the people: 'I am with you,' declares the LORD. So the LORD stirred up the spirit of Zerubbabel ... and the spirit of Joshua ..., and the spirit of the whole remnant of the people. They came and began to work on the house of the LORD Almighty, their God."

They were doing the obeying but **God's team spirit was moving hearts**. There it is again but secondly, **God's team spirit uses diverse personalities and roles working together**.

The leaders 'got on' together-and got on with it! There was unity among the people even if they knew they were a remnant of a once great Israel, knowing that God was with them.

We see a similar teamwork of roles inspired by God's Spirit under Nehemiah in the later wall building project.

We see worship musical gifts, practical serving by Levites, priests in the services, Ezra heading a team of teachers of God's Word, and Nehemiah's all-round abilities to manage and discern the priorities. And then there are the lists of names and families, as if everyone mattered.

Something of that does read across to us in the community of the church, Kings Church Bangor. (pastoral use of Church Suite...)

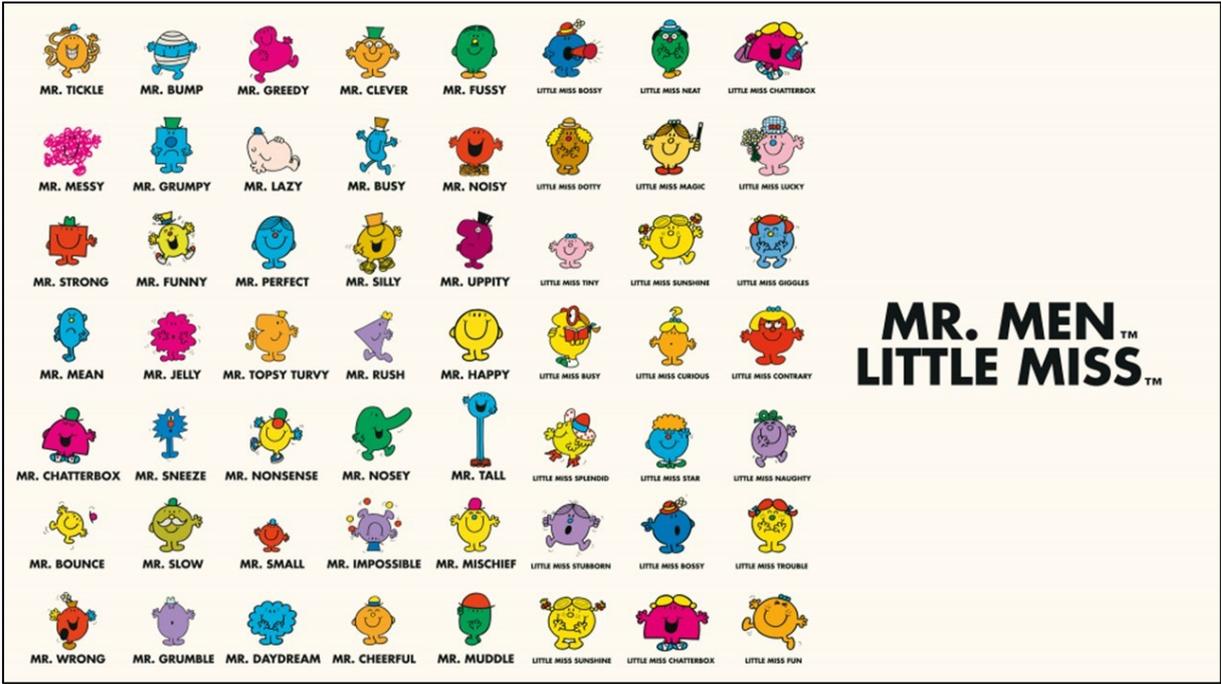


Lesley and I walked at Island Hill on Strangford Lough last year where beds of different rocks are mixed up and eroded into multi-coloured pebbles. Beauty in difference together.

Some of our diversity may be more like the wonky veg that supermarkets reject.



...Or the characteristics, good and bad, of a range of childrens' books.



But the message from Corinthians last week and the Restoration story is that all God's people have a place, a calling and are needed in God's work, helped by God's Team Spirit.



It may seem a bit theoretical to speak about great teamwork in Team Jesus, when so much of life and work is locked down. Well, there will be a huge opportunity when the lid is lifted at some time in 2021 because of the great vaccine lab teamwork! And in the meantime, let us prepare, study God's Word, pray and find more ways to be kind, connected, thankful and filled 'not with might nor by power' as the world sees it 'but by God's Spirit'.

A way to let God move our hearts to do the difficult thing, risk our comfort, serve in Team Jesus, is to welcome his Holy Spirit as we worship in song and prayerfulness. Let's use two songs in that way now.

Iain Stewart Kings Church Bangor 10th January 2021