

“Hallowed be your name”

“Mission in Crisis”

AEA 1 October 2005

**Ezekiel 36: 16-38**

**Introduction (on the CEEC website [www.ceec.info](http://www.ceec.info))**

1. We will be hearing much today about the current state of the worldwide Anglican Communion, and I for one am looking forward very much to hearing directly about the situations of which we have mostly had only brief second-hand glimpses, if that. We in Crosslinks have been looking, as a mission agency, at how to focus our efforts over the next 10 years bearing in mind the world scene at the beginning of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century, a world, which is different in many ways from that which confronted our founding fathers back in 1922. That involved us in taking a selective look at God’s 21<sup>st</sup> Century World; as a predominantly Anglican agency we obviously needed to consider the actual and potential scenarios in the Anglican Communion. This we did with the information at our disposal.
2. What was vital, however, in order to have a useful time was that we spent some time hearing how God views his world. For this we turned to the Scriptures. Now this may seem to be teaching ‘grannies to suck eggs’, this is after all an Anglican Evangelical Assembly! Of course we start with what God has to say, but I would humbly suggest that this is not an assumption that we can make: I am member of a networking organisation of various evangelical agencies seeking to do a particular work in a particular part of the world and on one occasion we were preparing a 2-day planning consultation. We talked about assembling all the expertise needed to help us to think clearly and accurately about the issues and the country, but there was no talk until near the end with a prompt about carrying this out within the broad canvas of what God says about his world through his word.
3. Now, after last week’s meeting by Crosslinks we could legitimately ask ourselves how well we applied the biblical thinking to our later discussions. Sometimes as evangelicals we do the Bible bit at the beginning, simply because that is what is expected, as we do grace before meals, and countless other traditions, but we are poor at relating subsequent discussions to what God has taught us.
4. I hope that today this first session will remind us of how God thinks and acts, and that all we do for the remainder of the day will be done in the light of that.
5. **Prayer.** James 1:22-25.  
*But be doers of the word, and not hearers only, deceiving yourselves.23 For if anyone is a hearer of the word and not a doer, he is like a man who looks intently at his natural face in a mirror.24 For he looks at himself and goes away and at once forgets what he was like.25 But the one who looks into the perfect law, the law of liberty, and perseveres, being no hearer who forgets but a doer who acts, he will be blessed in his doing.*
6. We need to start from the conviction that God is a missionary God and the Bible, the word of that missionary God, is a missionary book; thus we could take any part of the Bible and cut it open like a stick of Brighton or Blackpool rock, and be certain to find the theme of mission in some way, shape or form.

To change the analogy, mission, God's missionary concern, is in the bloodstream and it will ooze out from whatever part of the Bible that we choose to cut open.

7. So, as we come to the book of Ezekiel we will expect to hear God say something about his mission for his world, and that is precisely what we find, but it is said at a particular time and situation, and we therefore need to know something about this in order to apply it correctly and accurately.
8. God's rescue mission for his world, which is the story of the Bible, at this OT juncture is focussed in the descendants of Abraham, the people of Israel, to whom God had promised that:
  - a. He would give them a land,
  - b. He would make them into a great nation,
  - c. He would bless them, and through them would bless all the families of the earth.

So if we want to see God's concern and actions for all nations we need to see it as bound up in Israel. God binds himself to associate himself, his name and his actions with the people of Israel; the futures of both are to be inextricably linked, so that when King Solomon is in all his splendour the Queen of Sheba comes and says, "Blessed be the Lord your God".

9. We are familiar with the concept of name association: when the England cricket team triumphed over the Australians in the Summer English people felt proud and celebrated; even though actually only 11 or so Englishmen were involved in the victory, we all celebrated and received the boost because of our association with that team. It wasn't our victory, but it was by association so that we could say that we beat the Aussies. Crosslinks was involved in trying to book hotel accommodation for the retiring Tanzanian bishop of Tabora and his wife in Belfast around Wednesday 7<sup>th</sup> September; one of the difficulties proved to be the coincidence with the night of Northern Ireland versus England football world cup qualifier, and all the accommodation was fully booked. Most English know what happened on the pitch that night and are keen not to relive it for the embarrassment it causes us, yet we were not among the 11 English footballers and Swedish coach who lost on the pitch. But we feel shame by association as we felt pride by association in the summer.
10. Sadly Israel, throughout its history, even at the relative high points, does not give great grounds for optimism in terms of living up to the association with the name of the Lord, but God proves faithful to all his promises. Ezekiel is giving his message in the early part of the 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC. Some 120 years earlier, because of Israel's behaviour and because God is faithful to his promises of judgement as well as to his promises of blessing, the Northern part of the divided kingdom was destroyed and the survivors exiled, leaving the small rump of Judah under the descendants of King David, to whom God had made wonderful promises about his throne, his house and his kingdom being established for ever. Their behaviour is no better however and so God promises judgment on them too. In 598/597 Ezekiel, a trainee priest, together with the cream of Judah, are carried off into exile 800 miles across the desert in Babylon by the Babylonian king Nebuchadnezzar, leaving the puppet king Zedekiah in Jerusalem with an even smaller remnant. In 592 God calls Ezekiel to be a prophet, giving him the job of interpreting all that had happened from God's perspective and prophesying what would happen, and all this for his

fellow exiles in Babylon. Whilst he does this for the next 20 years his contemporary Jeremiah is performing the same role for those in Jerusalem, a kind of 6<sup>th</sup> Century BC equivalent to having CNN reporters simultaneously in Washington and in Baghdad.

11. A very common phrase, used in various forms throughout the book of Ezekiel, is the phrase, “then you/they will know that I am the Lord”. It reflects God’s desire to be known by all people everywhere for who he is and what he does, so when he predicts disaster and judgment on the nations around Judah in Chapters 25-32 he finishes the prophecies with the phrase: “Then they will know that I am the Lord”. In other words, God will be God and they will know it because he is the One true God of the nations just as much as the God of Israel, God wants people to know him and to respond to that knowledge in terms attitude and action. The underlying assumption is that they did not yet know the Lord because that knowledge was not reflected in the way they behaved.
12. But what about God’s people, the people of Israel, the Holy Nation, the Kingdom of priests, through whom God was to bring blessing to all the families on the earth and to whom God has associated himself, his name and his actions so inextricably? What happens when their attitudes and actions do not reflect their knowledge of him? What happens when God’s New Testament people, the church, does not live lives that reflect our knowledge of God? This is the issue which faced the exiles in Babylon on the banks of the River Quebar and seeing how God responds to that situation shows us how he responds to the same situation now. How will God be God and all the world know it, how will God’s name be vindicated/honoured/defended, when the people associated with him fail to fulfil our part of the bargain? Relevance for the Anglican Communion? This is the issue we face in Ezekiel 36 and Ezekiel shows us two ways (stop wagging on the tee and plunge in):

### **A. God’s Name is Vindicated in Judgement (vs16-19)**

13. Actually this is a good summary of the content of Ezekiel 1-24. Israel had defiled the land God had given them by the way they had acted which was not in accord with their knowledge of God. Their conduct was impure (in the context of Leviticus 15 this is not a pejorative reference to women) and repulsive in God’s eyes, affronting his holy name.
14. Vs 18 tells us what Israel had been doing:
  - a. They had shed blood. In their dealings with other people they had committed many offences.
  - b. In their dealings with God, secondly, they had been adulterous, claiming the benefits of association with the Lord, but at the same time going after other gods.
15. Israel had defiled the land by their treatment of people and by their idolatry. What was the response of God? (18a) *“So I poured out my wrath on them”* and (Vs 19) *“I scattered them among the nations and they were dispersed through the countries. In accordance with their ways and their deeds I judged them.”*
16. That was the message that Ezekiel delivered to his fellow exiles. What they had suffered was not merely military defeat: many other nations had suffered that at the hands of the Babylonians. No, they were under the wrath of God himself; God had turned against them and his judgement was a necessary outworking of his holy character.

17. That should not surprise us. Sinners (those who have rebelled against God's rule) have always been judged and will always be judged by a holy God. It was true of Adam and Eve, it was true of Ezekiel's fellow exiles, it is true today and it always will be true for "*he has fixed a day on which he will judge the world in righteousness by a man whom he has appointed; and of this he has given assurance to all by raising him from the dead* (Acts 17:30-31)".
18. Why does Ezekiel have to expend so many chapters talking of God's judgement (why do so many of the prophets do so) and why actually does Jesus speak so much of judgement? Because we humans are incredibly ingenious in thinking our way out of it! "*You will not surely die*" is one of the oldest ruses in the book. The Israelites of Ezekiel's day were similarly dense when it came to seeing the inevitable outcome to their rebellion. In Chapter 33:21 when all that Ezekiel had prophesied came true and "*a fugitive from Jerusalem came to me and said, 'The city has been struck down'*" there were still people who were saying (24) "*Abraham was only one man and yet he got possession of the land; but we are many; the land is surely given to us to possess.*" What will it take to make people face the awful truth of the holiness of God? In Chapter 37 Ezekiel is taken to the valley of dry bones, bones that were very dry, and we see evidence that at last the penny dropped for the people say: "*Our bones are dried up, and our hope is lost; we are cut off completely.*" Just like in Ephesians 2 where the gentiles are described as without hope and without God in the world.
19. We need to remember today the awful truth about the 70% + of the world population who do not acknowledge Jesus as Lord and what each and all of them face. Let's not be tempted to optimism based on statistics of 18m Anglicans in Nigeria, or of the rapid growth rate in some Southern churches, or by thinking that evangelical churches are bucking the awful trends in the Church of England, because so many remain outside and untouched.
20. Neither must we fall into thinking that God's judgement only falls on the pagan world, terrible though that is and cause enough to drive us to our knees. If Israel with all the promises God had made and all the knowledge of God given to them, could face the wrath of God poured out on them, what makes us think that the C of E or the Anglican Communion will escape when our conduct is not in accord with our much greater knowledge of God.
21. God will be God and we will know it because in his holiness he will judge all people everywhere beginning "*at the household of God and if it begins with us, what will be the outcome for those who do not obey the gospel of God?* (1 Peter 4:17).
22. If we needed proof of judgement we need look no further than the cross of Christ where '*he himself bore our sins in his body on the tree*'.
23. When we pray the Lord's Prayer: '*Hallowed be your name*' let us remember what the holiness of God's name means and respond appropriately. God's name was vindicated in judgement.
24. **But** that poses a problem as we shall see: in showing himself holy by judging Israel, even with every justification, there were huge consequences (20-21):  
**20** *But when they came to the nations, wherever they came, they profaned my holy name, in that people said of them, These are the people of the LORD, and yet they had to go out of his land.***21** *But I had concern for my holy name, which the house of Israel had profaned among the nations to which they came.*
25. God's name was profaned (made common, ground in the dirt, rather than upheld as holy) by the very fact that he was judging them and scattering them

among the nations, as he had promised. Why? Because the very act of judging the people to whom he had made such extravagant promises, although justified and promised, was giving him a bad name because it appeared that his perfect purposes to bless Israel and through them all the families of the earth had come to nothing. His name was mud in the contemporary scene and he was the laughing stock of the nations by association with his people.

26. That is why judgement of the people of Israel was not his final word. No, he had to act again in order to vindicate his holy name because (20) *“I had concern for my holy name.”*

## **B. God’s Name is Vindicated in Mercy (22ff)**

27. Note first how God underlines the reason why he is about to act (22-23):  
**22** *Therefore say to the house of Israel, Thus says the Lord GOD: It is not for your sake, O house of Israel, that I am about to act, but for the sake of my holy name, which you have profaned among the nations to which you came.***23** *And I will vindicate the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations, and which you have profaned among them. And the nations will know that I am the LORD, declares the Lord GOD, when through you I vindicate my holiness before their eyes.*
28. In other words he acts to vindicate his holy name for which he has concern. He acts for his own honour and so that *‘the nations will know that I am the Lord, when I vindicate my holiness before their eyes (23)’*. That is the ‘why’ he will act again, this time in mercy, and why judgement will not be his final word.
29. But ‘what’ will he do, ‘how’ will he act in mercy? God through Ezekiel gives us four different images of what he will do, and he gives them when all other hope has been snuffed out:
- a. **Gather them.** He will gather God’s people from the nations and bring them into their own land (24). That does of course happen in a marvellous, even if limited, way under Cyrus from 537 onwards, but Ezekiel’s prophecy really finds its fulfilment when Jesus says: *“Come to me, all who labour and are heavy laden, and I will give you (not Palestine but) rest”*. (Matthew 11:28). When did this happen? John 12:32: *“And I (Jesus) when I am lifted up from the earth (the cross) will draw all people to myself”*.
  - b. **Cleanse them.** Sprinkle clean water, clean from all uncleannesses and cleanse from all their idols (25). A new temple was later built where sacrifices for sin could be made but further on Jesus said to Peter: *‘If I do not wash you, you have no share with me’* (John 13:8) and Paul reminds the Corinthians: *“You were washed, you were sanctified, you were justified in the name of the Lord Jesus Christ and by the Spirit of our God”* (1 Corinthians 6:11).
  - c. **Put His Spirit in them.** (26) And give them new birth: *“Unless one is born of water and the spirit, he cannot enter the Kingdom of God (John 3: 6)”*.
  - d. **Cause the Spirit to rule in them.** (27) so that they would obey instead of fail. *“Who walk not according to the flesh but according to the Spirit... You, however, are not in the flesh but in the Spirit, if in fact the Spirit of God dwells within you”* (Romans 8).
30. All the fulfilment in the Old Testament of these prophecies was a mere shadow, a false pregnancy, a pointing forward to Christ and to what he achieved.

31. We've seen why God will act and what he will do, but what would be the outcomes of this extraordinary act of mercy?
- a. **In the lives of God's people** There is a surprise here for we might expect Ezekiel's hearers to cheer and celebrate with great joy when at last they got some good news, but that is not what happens (31-32):  
**31** *Then you will remember your evil ways, and your deeds that were not good, and you will loathe yourselves for your iniquities and your abominations.***32** *It is not for your sake that I will act, declares the Lord GOD; let that be known to you. Be ashamed and confounded for your ways, O house of Israel.*
  - b. **In the lives of the nations** Whilst shame and loathing will be the response of the undeserved recipients of God's mercy, God's ultimate purpose (in line with his desire to honour his name) is his recognition as the Lord among the nations. In Vs 36 "*the nations that are left all around*" are the survivors of the Babylonian conquests, and the ones who earlier derided Israel's God for his supposed inability to save his people, yet now they are drawing different conclusions about the nature of Israel's God and "*shall know that I am the Lord*".
- So, the 'they' of the final verse (38) are actually the Israelites and the nations and "*then they will know that I am the Lord*"; in other words the result of God's act of mercy, accomplished and fulfilled in the Lord Jesus Christ is that all Israel and all nations shall conclude that the Lord alone is God.
32. So the wonderful news is that Judgement is not God's final word because he has concern for his name, which was profaned among the nations and he always works in accordance with his perfect will. God's mission would have failed right there and then if he had not acted in mercy for the sake of his holy name, and because he acted there and then and kept alive his promises to Israel which were fulfilled in Christ then there is also to be hope for us Gentiles who believe.
33. But we need to keep reminding ourselves that it is by God's grace and definitely not because of any desserts. That will fill us with joy as we contemplate it day by day but it will also humble us and give us a loathing for our ways that made it necessary for Christ to die in our place. Sometimes our testimonies seem to revel in the depths of depravity from which God has rescued us but that is not the way that Ezekiel commends.
34. So, if there is any hope for the Anglican Communion or the Church of England, let us remember why God acted in mercy for his Old Testament people Israel and not be tempted to lean on any wonderful heritage we might have been given.
35. So when we pray that prayer again: "*Hallowed be your name*" let us remember what that might mean, if not in deserved judgement, then in wonderful but undeserving mercy.

## Conclusion

36. What will it be? How will God's name and honour be vindicated in the Church of England? Through judgement or through mercy?
37. We need to remember the extraordinary lengths that the Lord goes to in vindicating his name and fulfilling his eternal promise that all nations would be blessed through Israel.
38. May it be in our day, as it was in those desperate days for Judah, despite our manifold sins and wickedness, that God will grant the Church of England

mercy so that we may yet fulfil our part in his unfolding purposes. We are not Israel but God's purpose for his church in these the Last Days before the return of the Lord Jesus Christ is that "*we may proclaim the excellencies of him who called us out of darkness into his marvellous light*" (1 Peter 2:9). There is still a world to be won, a world that needs to '*know that he is the Lord*' whilst there is still time to repent. He only delays because he wishes that all should reach repentance rather than perish. Perhaps for the sake of others, if for no other reason, he may yet spare us.

**Our Father in heaven,  
hallowed be your name,  
your kingdom come,  
your will be done,  
on earth as it is in heaven.  
Give us today  
our daily bread.  
Forgive us our sins  
as we forgive those  
who sin against us.  
Lead us not into temptation  
but deliver us from evil.  
For yours is the kingdom,  
the power and the glory,  
now and for ever. Amen.**

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