



Filling the Void (Ezekiel 22:23-31)

When I was at a meeting of the EBA a few weeks ago, I was asked to say a few words about what the Lord was doing here. I called my presentation “Filling the Void”. You all know about the Swaffham Void. We are the only town for 8 miles in an area where there has been substantial decline of the church. In most villages there is barely any Christian witness of any sort, let alone vibrant churches. Of the churches that do exist, ministry is a struggle and we know of that struggle here.

I find Ezekiel’s words about the decline of the nation of Judah so prophetic for the decline of God’s people in Britain today. Let’s see what he found:

Corrupt Religion

26 Her priests do violence to my law and profane my holy things; they do not distinguish between the holy and the common; they teach that there is no difference between the unclean and the clean; and they shut their eyes to the keeping of my Sabbaths, so that I am profaned among them.

28 Her prophets whitewash these deeds for them by false visions and lying divinations. They say, ‘This is what the Sovereign LORD says’--when the LORD has not spoken.

The thing was that whilst Judah declined, the worship of God continued. Remember that there is always a difference between doing religion and obeying God. There has been much in the past year about the way in which some Christians have perverted God’s law to suit themselves and mould themselves according to what society wants. The problem is that it doesn’t stop there. We are all polluted in some way by the values of the world. Why? Because it suits us to mould religion to how we want it.

And we love to point the finger at others. One of the things that has saddened me since coming into ministry is the way that we point the finger at other Christians and say “ we don’t have fellowship with them because” And I’ve heard all sorts of things. Remember when you point the finger that three point back at you. I know of many that pride themselves in being evangelical and therefore sound Bible-believing Christians yet their churches are moulded in their image just as much as the ones they criticise. They have their faith and their practices on their terms, not on what God wants. And how do I know that? Because good sound evangelical churches have suffered as the rest. They’re sound all right - sound asleep!

I’ve been brought up in ”sound” churches all my life. Most were smug about their evangelical heritage and their superiority to other churches. But some struggled just as badly. The ones that grew and prospered were always the ones that sought the face of God, to do His will, to live as he wanted them to, to desire to serve Him and to have His desire to love and reach the lost.

I guess I've said much about this over the past couple of years and maybe you're fed up of hearing it. But the prophets also had the same theme and no-one listened to their cry and call to obey the voice of God rather than the voice of religion, however good that religion sounded - and look what happened to them.

Corrupt Government

25 There is a conspiracy of her princes within her like a roaring lion tearing its prey; they devour people, take treasures and precious things and make many widows within her.

27 Her officials within her are like wolves tearing their prey; they shed blood and kill people to make unjust gain.

This was a land where faith became irrelevant in life. Take away the moral standards and everyone does right in his own eyes. We live in that kind of society. "It doesn't matter what you do as long as you don't hurt anybody". Nice sentiment. And in our society we tolerate the unthinkable. This year we will see another piece of legislation that erodes Christian marriage. But it's no use complaining because with our weak and wishy-washy Christianity, we let it happen.

Corrupt People

29 The people of the land practice extortion and commit robbery; they oppress the poor and needy and mistreat the alien, denying them justice.

The people had turned the things of God on their head. That rot had gone all the way into society, government and organised religion. Even those that thought they were speaking with the words of God weren't. We live in a society now that is more unjust, more crime ridden, more racist and more unstable than probably anything in the past. And where are the people of God? Relegated to a minority whose rights to openly preach and make disciples which were obtained by the blood of martyrs a few centuries ago are going to be taken away soon.

Ezekiel came at the end of a process. There had been plenty of prophets who had seen all this before. It wasn't something new. Prophets had been warning Judah of its impending doom for over 100 years. They had warned of these things, yet people did the same thing. And all the time their kingdom was being eroded and taken away from them, yet they would not respond.

Why didn't they see it? Why did they lock away prophets like Jeremiah and ignore Ezekiel? Because it didn't suit them. Yet as the Church has plummeted into decline we have hung like grim death to our traditions, and our denominations, our doctrines, our petty theological battles and our way of doing things as though they were the most important things on the planet. And what did God do? He took them from us - or allowed the enemy to take them. And that's happening right now. That is the prospect for 2004 in our nation.

That's the awfulness of books like Ezekiel, He was a man who saw the destruction of his nation and the taking of the people into exile because of their disobedience. The temple was there, the sacrifices were there, the law was there, the prophets were there, but God took it all from them because they wouldn't listen to His voice.

Just having church and church structures is not enough. They are there to focus on the true and living God. If we are not obedient to Him and doing His will, or worse, bend it to suit our desires - the result is what happened to Jerusalem - and what is happening in the Church of God now. I challenge anybody to find any other reason for the demise of the Church of God in Britain.

The saddest thing about Ezekiel's message is in verse 30

30 "I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land so I would not have to destroy it, but I found none.

There was all this decline, but there was no-one who was prepared to do anything about it. No-one to build the wall. No-one to stand in the gap. No-one to fill the void.

We have seen the decline and it is still continuing. But who will stand in the gap? Who will build the wall?

This is a challenge for us today. We have seen the church of God decimated in this part of Norfolk and it is not untypical of Britain. The issue is that we are still here, still a witness. Are we prepared to stand in the gap, or build the wall or fill the Swaffham void or whatever else.

I believe the message for 2004 is that we as the people of God are called to stand in the gap and build the wall here in Swaffham. Just what does that mean?

In those days when the wall of the city was breached so that the enemy might come in, the defenders had no choice but to stand in the gap and defend it. They then had an opportunity to rebuild the breach. The corruption of the previous years had meant that the people were vulnerable to spiritual, social and moral collapse. No-one had stood in the gap on behalf of the land and now it was to be destroyed.

How can we stand in the gap for our area? We stand in the gap in a number of ways:

In intercession

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land

We need to stand in the gap on behalf of the land. We are called to fill the void so therefore we stand and intercede for that land and its people. If we want to stop the decline we start by coming before God and stand in the gap for the Swaffham area. Remember that the warfare we are engaged in is spiritual warfare. And if we want to do warfare here we stand before God and make intercession for this people and this land. We are going to do that this year - more seriously and more earnestly than we have done before because we know the consequences if we don't.

In witness

We stand in the gap in witness. The brave soldiers that stood in the gap and faced the enemy to protect the city stood as brave testimony to the others. As we stand in the gap, we are a witness to those for whose benefit we stand - the lost people of Swaffham and the surrounding villages. We are called to bring salvation to these people. As we stand before God and on His behalf, we bring words of salvation and rescue to a world which is drifting and drowning. That's our role and destiny because if we don't, there won't be anything left.

In building anew

I looked for a man among them who would build up the wall and stand before me in the gap on behalf of the land

It wasn't a case of just standing in the gap and protecting the hole in the wall, but building afresh. New defences, a new way of life. We are called to build. In 2004 we are going to be literally building the fabric of the church, but spiritually building too.

**Building within our fellowship. Building in our community, building in the villages.
We aren't just called to stand but to build up.**

I believe that we have a challenging year ahead. It's going to be another one of seeing things we have not seen before. Maybe you find this daunting because it means change in one form or another and you've already seen plenty of that in the last 18 months. These things will come with risk and cost but we have a choice.

But our choice I believe is the same as Ezekiel's. It's a simple case of survival. If we don't stand in the gap, if we don't build the wall then the church won't be here in five or ten years to tell the tale and probably most of us won't be around either.

But it starts with us realising that we are called - all of us - to stand in the gap and to build the walls. I believe that we've already started that standing and building. Now we've got to stay there and build.

If that is our desire, then we have an exciting 2004 ahead. We've already had a down-payment of what is to come, let's stand in that gap and build the wall and see God glorified.

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