

Christ Church Clifton Sermon Notes & Questions



Series: Preparing for a new start Summer 2021

Passage: Ezra 7,8 Being Family and community

Preacher: Janet Lee **Date of Sermon:** June 20th 2021

Being family and community part 1 (part 2 will be stories from different church members what it means in practice to be church family or community)

Series preparing for a new start, looking at parallels between time of Ezra and Nehemiah, and us today. They were returning from exile in Babylon to Jerusalem rebuilding the temple first then the walls of the city, a journey. 900 miles from Babylon in stages over 100 years, going back, but not the same as when they left, parallel with us today, preparing to come back to church, after pandemic, after building project in stages.

Turn to Ezra 7 and 8, first 6 chapters of Ezra occurred in 539BC, Cyrus, king of Persia had defeated Babylonians, so he looked more kindly on many exiles living there and allowed them to return to their home, so chap1-6 under Zerubbabel first group of Jews came back to restore the temple for worship, they rebuilt the altar, the foundations, by chap 6 had finished building of temple and celebrated with great joy, held the Passover.

Now 57 years later from chapter 6, around 458BC, Ezra returns with another group to Jerusalem he is a priest or scribe. Can date it from 7v7, seventh year of King Artaxerxes. (other scholars 428 or 397BC) This assorted group of people travelled 900 miles from Babylon back to Jerusalem over 4 month period.

This family history, Ezra 7v1-6 shows us he was descended from Eleazar one of the sons of Aaron, the chief priest and brother of Moses. So what do we see about family and community in chapters 7 and 8 of Ezra?

1. Who came? A mixture of people and roles
2. Who was missing?
3. How did they work together?
4. How did they pray together?

Who came? Another group, came in different groups over a century back to Jerusalem like returning to CC, in small groups, people had a choice whether to come on the journey, whether to give freely towards the rebuilding.

*Ezra 7v 7 **Some** of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.*

Note word **some** Israelites, many in exile not all came back, some were early returnees some more cautious, but had option of returning. See King Artaxerxes letter to Ezra, 7v12,13.

The king Artaxerxes, (n.b, king of kings a title used by Kings of Persia) decreed that any Israelites could go with Ezra's on journey, who volunteer to go, God does not force people to go with him, we choose whether to follow him on that journey. Any Jew was free to leave to Babylon. A generous gesture by King, generosity, means letting people go, giving a choice not forcing people.

¹⁵ *Moreover, you are to take with you the silver and gold that the king and his advisors have freely given to the God of Israel, whose dwelling is in Jerusalem, ¹⁶ together with all the silver and gold you may obtain from the province of Babylon, as well as the freewill offerings of the people and priests for the temple of their God in Jerusalem.*

More generosity in the family of Jews, free will offerings for the temple, cf RENEW, give freely to project. One of the marks of family and community is generosity of spirit, and of money, giving choice, giving freely. The money was for the temple of God, basic building had taken place but needed fitting out, so articles of silver and gold.

¹⁸ You and your fellow Israelites may then do whatever seems best with the rest of the silver and gold, in accordance with the will of your God. ¹⁹ Deliver to the God of Jerusalem all the articles entrusted to you for worship in the temple of your God.

Following their free choice, a mixed group set out on that journey in 458BC, 7v7

⁷ Some of the Israelites, including priests, Levites, musicians, gatekeepers and temple servants, also came up to Jerusalem in the seventh year of King Artaxerxes.

Family or Community is made up of a variety of people and variety of roles. Not everyone did same job. Priests for leading worship, offer sacrifices in temple, Levites, supporting priests and other duties in temple musicians for leading the worship, gatekeepers, like welcomers on door, guarding and protecting, and temple servants whose role was to serve as needed. In same way, in our church family, there is a variety of roles not all are worship leaders. Last week we prayed for and commissioned 4 to be ordained as serve as curates, Bob, Debs, Errol and Caroline. Is there a particular role God is calling you to do in the family? Family –a mixture of roles.

Ezra had a special role, as a priest or scribe, he was v6 *He was a teacher well versed in the Law of Moses, which the LORD, the God of Israel, had given* v10 ¹⁰ *For Ezra had devoted himself to the study and observance of the Law of the LORD, and to teaching its decrees and laws in Israel.*

He taught the decrees and law had a talent for teaching but he had devoted himself to study and observance of law, read scriptures (Torah) but also obeyed them, in our different roles keep studying Bible Study, be well versed but observe it too, not just a dry study, observe the law too.

Besides Ezra and a group of Jews, In the group of exiles not all were pure Israelites because of intermarriage, there were people on the fringe with connections of sorts. Who are people on the fringe on our journey?

Example of my family on holiday all playing different roles such as packing car, remembering sunscreen, navigating, cooking, could mix up the roles, but better when we play our natural roles. We need each other, don't beat yourself up if you are not a Levite, or gatekeeper, or musician, what role in church family is God calling you to do. Who came? A mixture of people and roles, chose to come on journey.

Who was missing? Move to chapter 8, description of the group gathering by canal towards Ahava, NW of Babylon. V1-14, list of names of people up to 1500 men (also women and children)

¹⁵ *I assembled them at the canal that flows toward Ahava, and we camped there three days. When I checked among the people and the priests, I found no Levites there.* ¹⁸ *Because the gracious hand of our God was on us, they brought us Sherebiah, a capable man, from the descendants of Mahli son of Levi, the son of Israel, and Sherebiah's sons and brothers, 18 in all; ¹⁹ and Hashabiah, together with Jeshaiah from the descendants of Merari, and his brothers and nephews, 20 in all.*

Ezra checks the large group and finds no Levites, so he summons the leaders and go find me attendants for the house of our God, they found 2 Sherebiah and Hashabiah. And both men brought their sons brothers and nephews with them another 38 people. Who is missing in our family? Go and look? And they bring with them their extended families how church grows, one person brings their family or friends, is there a category missing from our church community? The community needs everyone, all roles. The phrase used by Ezra in 8v18 is ¹⁸ **Because the gracious hand of our God was on us**, phrase is often repeated in book, Ezra7:28. God shows his favour to his people, things work out, God's hand is there behind the scenes, 7v6 *The king had granted him everything he asked, for the hand of the LORD his God was on him* So family comes with a mixture of people hold different roles have a free choice, notice who is missing and do something.

How did they work together?

Together, they travelled as a group, first they rebuilt the temple in Ezra, and later the walls in time of Nehemiah together. Look at 8v24-30 They were carrying a lot of valuable treasure on the journey so Ezra divided it out amongst the priests and Levites, he trusted them, later on in v 34, 4 months later when reached Jerusalem, ³⁴ *Everything was accounted for by number and weight, and the entire weight was recorded at that time.*

They literally shared the burden, and all was accounted for nothing was lost or stolen. Do we have same level of sharing, or of trusting? Working together for greater good of whole family or church community –another example in Neh 3 as they rebuilt the walls, all worked on a different section.

We are dependent on each other on our own we cannot rebuild all the wall or the temple, the community worked together, the community rebuilt the walls. Building together, gives that sense of belonging, I am part of the community, being family, we all have a part to play, example of moving crypt contents upstairs and downstairs, many hands helped. Next week, hear more about being church family. Pandemic has shown us how we need each other, how we missed people and connection how we crave being together again. Be a proper church family.

Ezra 8 v21 There, by the Ahava Canal, I proclaimed a fast, so that we might humble ourselves before our God and ask him for a safe journey for us and our children, with all our possessions. 23 So we fasted and petitioned our God about this, and he answered our prayer.

Before this long journey, Ezra gathers everyone and they fast and pray together. They didn't assume plain straightforward hazard free journey, first they humbled themselves, they fasted not just Ezra, and they prayed or petitioned God and he answered our prayer. Old adage *The family that prays together stays together* Before our car journey pray for a safe journey. As a church family do we pray together? Do we join in OCOD? Pray in small groups,? In our teams? Something about humbling yourself before God and asking him together, God answered their prayer.

So lots about family and community in Ezra 7, 8, next week more on how it works in practice in our own church.

Who is coming on the journey as we return to the building, prepare for a new start in September? What roles do we each play? Who is missing? Who is on our fringe? How do we work together? Pray for good of all?

Questions for study:

Optional starter What roles do you play in your family or group of friends?

1. Read Ezra 7, what was the journey they were about to embark on? How did it come about?
2. See 7v7 and 7v12,13 –what does this say about choice or freedom to go on journey back? what is meant by a culture of invitation?
3. See 7v15-19, where do we see generosity of spirit and of money here?
4. See 7,v6,7,10, list all the different types of people on the journey, what were Ezra's particular gifts? What are the different roles in church life today? Encourage each other by pointing out their gifts and roles.
5. See Ezra 8 v1-19, which important group was missing for the journey? What does Ezra do? Who is missing from our church community, what can we do to contact them?
6. See Ezra 7v28 and 8v18, what does gracious hand of God look like? How can we be encouraged?
7. See Ezra 8v24-30, how was treasure carried back to Jerusalem? what lessons are there for us in sharing burdens together? Give examples. (If time look at Neh 3, and example of what different people achieved working together)
8. See Ezra 8v23, what did they do together before start of this 900-mile journey? Again how do we practise corporate prayer? Give examples.

Finally, share ideas and pray on how we can apply all this today to Christ Church, to be a family or community working together as we prepare for a new start.