

'I will manifest my holiness amongst you'
(Ez. 36:16-38; Jn. 10:1-21)

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Well, I expect for many of us the images we've seen on our television screens and in our newspapers of the Syrian refugee crisis will remain with us. After six years of conflict, Syria remains the greatest refugee crisis of our time. In an interview with Oxfam, a Syrian refugee called Samira, who lives in a single shanty room with twelve other people, described her sense of isolation and despair. Her parents and husband were dead and with eight children to look after her prospects were bleak. In the interview which only lasted a few minutes she said over and over again, I hope that God will help us. Samira's experience is typical of those involved in this national crisis.

But a similar sense isolation can be experienced on a more personal level. Recently, Prince Harry described the chaos he experienced in his life after the death of his mother, of this loss Prince William spoke of his sense of profound shock. And I expect many of us have had similar feelings. Our own experience might not be quite so harrowing but many people in this country today talk of their sense of isolation, even when surrounded by others. Our own experience might even simply be the sense of isolation felt when working in a crowded library, but it's in a pastoral situation very much like all of these that we find Ezekiel ministering.

Having suffered a crushing defeat by the hands of Nebuchadnezzar, many Israelites were deported to Babylonia. There they experienced a profound sense of shock, of isolation and despair. Their family was dead, everything in chaos, they thought God was

all powerful but where was he now, he seemed to have abandoned them in exile. And it's into this refugee crisis that we find Ezekiel the priest being called by God to be his prophet to the exiles, to give them hope by showing them the way God was helping them. So instead of commiserating with them or focusing on their predicament, he helps them look beyond it with a firm emphasis on God whose main characteristic throughout the prophecy, is holiness.

The book itself is framed around three big visions of God's holiness each one emphasising a different aspect of God's holiness. In the first vision, God's faithfulness to the covenant is shown. The appearance of God's glory riding the throne chariot into Babylonia showed the people that God hadn't abandoned them in exile. In the second vision, God's justice is seen in the wrathful judgement of Israel whose behaviour was such that God's glory is seen reluctantly leaving the Temple. And then in the third vision, God's mercy is shown as the glory is seen returning. And the point of the emphasis on God's glory is that it's a visible manifestation God's holiness, that demonstrates his presence. And throughout the book Ezekiel is at pains to reassure the exiles that God's holy presence can be perceived not only by his glory, but also by his wrathful and merciful activity in judgment and restoration.

These days, of course, the notion of a wrathful angry God sits rather uncomfortably in many people's minds. One only has to think of comments by people like Richard Dawkins who in his book *The God Delusion* maintains that, 'The God of the Old Testament is arguably the most unpleasant character in all fiction: unjust, unforgiving; a capriciously malevolent bully'. As we've heard in our reading, though, Ezekiel paints a

different picture. Certainly, he portrays God pouring out his wrath on the people, but this is not an unjust act. God has good grounds for behaving in this way. Ezekiel shows this by describing two broad categories of sin both found in v. 18: idolatry, which refers to all sins against God, and bloodshed, which refers to all sin towards humanity. And this combination demonstrates a total disdain for the Ten Commandments and the covenant instituted at Sinai.

So, having set out the reasons for God's wrath, the prophet describes it in terms of scattering and dispersion among the nations. But in case this should be misconstrued as the act of a malevolent bully, we should recall the way we're told God felt about all of this. In Ezekiel 6 [:9], in the middle of pronouncing judgement on idolatrous Israel, God admits that he was crushed by their wanton hearts. Yet, despite the pain that their behaviour caused him he sent them into exile, an act which profaned his holy name causing him more pain because it cost him his reputation as an all-powerful God.

Not only does the prophet portray God's wrath as being just, through the use of colourful imagery Ezekiel points out that God's wrath is far from being capricious. In our passage, God's wrath is described being poured out but elsewhere in Ezekiel, God is portrayed burning with anger (22:31, 38:19, 36:5), God's wrath is also depicted symbolically as a 'cup' (23:32-34). This idea is common one in the Old Testament. Psalm 75 (8) speaks of God holding a cup of wine that he'll pour out on the wicked, and Jeremiah (25:15) talks about the cup of the wine of God's wrath.

But equally important in Ezekiel, is the idea we find in chapter 16 (42) that God's wrath can be satisfied, and in chapter 5 (13) that his

anger can be spent. The cup isn't constantly refilled; divine wrath isn't endless or capricious, but is specifically directed at sin in the interests of divine justice. And what's key in all of these passages, as James Muilenburg reminds us, is that whenever God's wrath is mentioned, we have to do with a holy manifestation, even when the word holy isn't mentioned. So, for the biblical writers all divine acts of judgement are understood to be manifestations of God's holiness that emphasise his presence in human experience.

But in Ezekiel, God's presence is also emphasised by his acts of mercy. Because God is holy, once sin has been dealt with and divine justice has been satisfied, his wrath has been poured out and spent, divine mercy can be extended to those who've sinned. And the way God does this is extraordinary, he uses the very same people who'd profaned his name and crushed him by their wanton hearts as vehicles for his holiness. v. 23 says, 'I will sanctify my name which you profaned among the nations when I manifest my holiness through you.' He does this by gathering his people from the nations and restoring them to their own land. But, of course, the people couldn't be gathered if they hadn't been scattered. It's the gathering that makes sense of the scattering, and it's the scattering that gives the gathering meaning.

And the point of all of this is to glorify God and sanctify his holy name. There's even a denial that this activity is for the benefit of Israel (22) although they're nevertheless its beneficiaries. And we see this once they're restored to the land. There they will be sprinkled with clean water from all their uncleanness. But let's notice the sequence, its only after the people have been restored that they're cleansed. Their restoration doesn't rely on their purity but it's an unmerited act of grace.

God's merciful activity is also seen the removal of the hearts of stone that are replaced with hearts of flesh and along with that, the bestowal of God's spirit within his people that will guide and show them how to observe God's statutes. 'Then', says God to his people in v. 28, 'Then you shall live'. And this life that God envisions isn't one of isolation but it's one of relationship in which he says you shall be my people and I shall be your God. This phrase is one that pops up from time to time in the Old Testament; it's known as the covenant formula and it sums up God's intentions for his people. The purpose of his wrathful and merciful acts, is to elicit a human response. God's greatest desire, emphasised by this covenant formula, is that his people will live in relationship with him because he knows that its only in relationship with him as their God that they'll live secure and peaceful lives, characterised in our passage as having grain and fruit in abundance. And this theme of an abundant life lived in relationship with God points us to the New Testament where we find in John's gospel Jesus talking about just that. He offers a life of abundance to those who are saved through him.

But offers need to be accepted just as gifts need to be received. So, while in Ezekiel God promises the gift of a new heart to his people, it still needs to be received by them. As then, so too today God offers a similar kind of divine cardiac surgery. But however deft the surgeon may be, the sad possibility exists that the patient might reject the donated organ and with it all hope of life. And in the same way that the cardiac patient's hope of life comes at the cost of another, so too the gift of life that God offers comes at the expense of Christ's death on the cross; its where he bore God's wrath. But Gods wrath as we've already seen, must always be considered with reference to his merciful purposes.

But it's the cross where these merciful purposes become most apparent. Jesus spoke about his death the night before he was betrayed. It's when he took bread, blessed it and broke it saying this bread is my body, broken for you, it's when he took the cup, the cup that we've seen is an image for God's wrath, the wrath which Ezekiel describes being poured out and spent. This cup of the wine of God's wrath that he directs to sin is the new covenant in my blood poured out for you says Jesus. And because Christ's blood was poured out and spent on the cross in full and final satisfaction of divine justice, mercifully poured out for the forgiveness of sins, we see that the cross is the primary place of encounter with the presence of God, it's where we discover that divine wrath is what gives divine mercy meaning.

But that meaning only becomes relevant in our lives when we receive the gift of a new heart. But by receiving it, not only do we have the opportunity of life in all abundance lived in relationship with God, but those lives bring glory God. And in the same way that God manifested his holiness through his people in Ezekiel, so he partners with his people today. As we lead compassionate lives of worship that reach out to others, so God manifests his holiness through us as we bring honour and glory to him. God says: 'A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you.' (Ez. 36:26) – then you shall live!