

**Date:** 25<sup>th</sup> September 2011

**Sermon:** Rev Dr André Groenewald

**Reading:** Ezekiel 18:1-4, 25-32

### **Background to the reading**

Ezekiel was one of the great prophets, the son of Buzi the priest. When King Nebuchadnezzar of Babylon captured Jerusalem in 597 B.C., he took many of the leading citizens of Jerusalem as hostages to Babylon, among whom was Ezekiel the priest. He was one of the Jewish exiles who settled at Tel-Abib, on the banks of the Chebar, "in the land of the Chaldeans." He was probably carried away captive with Jehoiachin. His prophetic call came to him "in the fifth year of Jehoiachin's captivity". He had a house in the place of his exile, where he lost his wife, in the ninth year of his exile, by some sudden and unforeseen stroke. He held a prominent place among the exiles, and was frequently consulted by the elders.

Ezekiel and his contemporaries confronted what for the Israelites was the most traumatic possible challenge to their faith: the destruction of Jerusalem and its temple.

Israel, it seems, had come to feel that their status as the people of God and in particular that the presence of the house of God among them had made them indestructible. Jeremiah 7:4 implies that the people trusted in the "temple of the LORD" for security. They could not imagine that God would allow his house to fall. Ezekiel's task was to demonstrate that this crutch was sure to fail even while he assured them that God himself had not failed.

Ezekiel seems to have been deeply affected by the message he was called upon to deliver. Following his initial call, he sat overwhelmed for seven days. He was given to extraordinary visions and engaged in prophetic symbolic acts, which must have appeared strange to many of his contemporaries. From the time of his call and until the final fall of Jerusalem in 586 B.C., he was a virtual recluse in his house and afflicted with fits of dumbness and immobility. The sudden death of his wife and his inability to mourn for her according to custom become a symbol of the sudden destruction of God's sanctuary in Jerusalem. His contemporaries viewed him as somewhat of a curiosity. Only in retrospect was his true greatness recognized and his words were preserved for posterity. We do not know when or under what circumstances Ezekiel died, though presumably it was in exile.

The book Ezekiel has a clear threefold structure. Chaps. 1-24 consist chiefly of oracles of judgment against Judah and Jerusalem prior to the fall of the city. This is followed in chaps. 25-32 by oracles against various foreign nations. After a transitional chapter (33) that links the first and third sections, there follow in chaps. 34-48 prophecies about the future restoration of the people in the promised land.

In our reading Ezekiel starts with a typical proverb of his time. It meant that the fathers were blamed for the current events such as the exile. The proverb originated

from the conception in the Old Testament where the group is considered more important than the individual. Children had to carry the consequences of the deeds of their fathers. Individuals suffered the consequences of the deeds of the group.

**But now the** Lord says that this is not the case. Every individual both father and son are responsible for their own deeds and cannot blame the other. Each individual must give account of their life. In verse 4 the one that sin will die, while the righteous who walk in the way of God, will live.

**In verses 25–29** God is responding to charges of injustice. It seems as if the people of Judah thought of themselves as innocent and blamed everything that happened in Jerusalem to the sins of their past generations. It seems as if they blamed “God” for punishing them of something they did not do.

Now God is saying to them that it is not him who is unjust. If they sin, He will punish them. If they live their lives according to His will, He will be forgiving. He is just. The death of an individual as a consequence of sin cannot be blamed on God but lies within the choice and responsibility of each individual.

God does not want to punish anyone. Now He offers them a way out of their wickedness. If they repent, turn to God, they will be saved. And why would they choose dying above living?

Our reading closes with the sad interrogative refrain, “Why will you die, O house of Israel?”. God takes no pleasure in judgment, so “Repent and live!”

Ezekiel eloquently made the point that there is no basis on which the guilty may fix blame on others but rather they must accept their own personal accountability to God. God’s dealings are always just and equitable; he gives ample, clear warning of the consequences of sin.

Amen

## **Sermon**

<sup>32</sup> *For I take no pleasure in the death of anyone, declares the Sovereign LORD. Repent and live!*

I do not think anyone will disagree that we are frightened of dying. The concept of death to us living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century remains still a mystery. Despite all the best medical discoveries, death still happens with us, and around us.

I once heard a conversation between a brain surgeon and a hospital chaplain about something that has happened. The brain surgeon was an atheist and while he was operating, and using all the best of his knowledge and experience, the patient still died. He could not understand how this could happen. The hospital chaplain then explained to him the basic fact of life namely that although he is the “best” brain surgeon, he is still a human being unlike God who is the Almighty controller of life and death.

And the chaplain added that God showed us, many years after the prophecy of Ezekiel that he indeed prefers life over death when He sent His Only Son Jesus to suffer, die for the sins of humans and be resurrected so that everyone who has faith in Him will be resurrected also. God showed His love, mercy and forgiveness when he took away all our sins. Death is nae mehr.

We that have faith live in the hope of the everlasting life when we will enter the Kingdom of God where there will be no more dying, pain or tears.

But we must have faith in God. And to have faith is to have knowledge of God which we will only find when reading our Bibles. To have hope in God, we need to have a relationship with Him which can only happen when we talk to Him regularly and come to worship services where we experience His presence amongst us. We have the promise that when we “turn” to God daily for help, and support, He will listen and respond in His own time and according to His will.

Life is too hard to cope with alone. We need the presence of God every second of every hour. We need His loving hand to guide us when the storms of life erupt and want to sweep us away. We need His loving arms when people push us away and are cruel and unkind. We need His hope for the future to know that this life is not our ultimate destiny. We are just passing through to a life where we will be with God forever and ever.

May God help us to have faith when life is hard, and people are cruel und unforgiving. May we go out of here this morning with renewed hope: Our Saviour lives! Death does nae exist anymore. Death has indeed lost its sting. May we be the witnesses of His forgiving grace and mercy in everything we think, say and do!

Amen