

I like to inspire my team in the morning by reminding them about special days. We celebrate birthdays and anniversaries, but I also like to mention some less well-known commemorations. I hope everyone here celebrated National Underwear Day on the 5th August. Yesterday was National I Love My Feet day and the 23rd is National Find Your Inner Nerd Day.

The Jewish year is divided differently to ours and is still linked to the new moon with various feast days and commemoration. Last month was Tammuz and we are now in the fifth month, the month of Av. Coming up in October are the big Autumn feasts which were instituted by God himself: starting with Rosh Hashanah (the Jewish New Year, literally the Head of the Year), then Yom Kippur (the day of Atonement) and finally Sukkot (commemorating the time God's people spent in the wilderness and His provision for them).

We are currently between two significant periods of the Jewish calendar, which are not recorded as being instituted by God. They commemorate events recorded in scripture and also subsequent events.

On the 17th Tammuz (23rd July this year), devout Jews started a period of mourning and fasting known as the Three of Destruction. During this period, all joy and celebration is banned, even to show pleasure at meeting someone is frowned upon. Bible study focuses on the books of Jeremiah and Lamentations, with the three Sabbath readings taken from Jeremiah chapters 1-3 and Isaiah 1 v1-27, part of which we've heard today.

The sadness intensifies over the three weeks, to a 9 day period of abstinence and mourning at the start of Av which culminates on the 9th Day of Av, called Tisha B'Av, the greatest day of sadness in the calendar. This happened last week on the 12th/13th August.

But why is this mourning period here?

In the first century AD, Judea was full of unrest: it was occupied by Rome and the country had a volatile mix of devout Jews, pagan Romans and Greeks, false prophets and groups of zealots who were fighting Rome – and each other – in attempts to free Judea from occupation.

In the decades after Jesus' death and resurrection around AD33, things came to a head. The zealot groups gained force and incited rebellion against Rome. Vespasian sent his son Titus to quell the rebellion with legions of soldiers. Jerusalem was besieged.

On the 17th of Tammuz AD70, the Romans breached the walls of Jerusalem and the surviving zealots and others who were trapped in the city moved up to the Temple for their last stand. On the 9th day of Av, the Temple was over-run, set on fire and looted: the Temple lampstands and vessels were taken to Rome and the survivors enslaved, exiled or crucified. (The Emperor Vespasian used the Temple plunder to fund a celebratory building project, the building known as the Coliseum.)

I don't think the impact of this event on the Jewish people can be over-stated. The only comparison I could think of was if Hitler had won the Battle of Britain, killed or enslaved most of the population, destroyed St Paul's cathedral and carried the King and Winston Churchill off to Berlin with the rest of the government. But even that comparison doesn't carry the weight of what the Jewish people suffered: they lost their homes, families, ancestral land and, most importantly, their meeting place with God, the Temple.

That on its own would be reason for mourning, but the 9th of Av is also the date when the first Temple was destroyed by the Babylonians, back in 586 BC. Again Jerusalem was besieged by it's

enemies, the walls were breached, the glorious Temple built by Solomon was destroyed and many were killed or taken into exile.

Tisha B'Av is also associated by Jewish scholars with an event even further back: although the exact date isn't known, Tisha B'Av commemorates the date when the Israelites listened to the fearful spies and refused to enter Canaan.

What do these events have in common?

There are some common strands here:

- Disobedience
- Ignoring God's grief and warnings
- Self-reliance
- God's judgement and their exile

Firstly, Disobedience:

In Canaan, the people sinned because they gave into the fear of man and their continuing desire for their old lives, the supposed good times of cucumbers and slavery back in Egypt. They forgot that God had destroyed the mighty Egyptian army and they let themselves be frightened of the Canaanite tribes. The God who had provided fresh water out of barren rock and manna out of nowhere, promised them a land flowing with milk and honey but they turned back to the wilderness.

Because of that sin, God gave them what they thought they wanted: a life back in the wilderness. He promised that the people would not enter the promised land until that whole generation had died out, with the exception of the two men who had trusted Him: Caleb and Joshua.

In the days of the first Temple, the nation had grown rich and self-satisfied. Jerusalem and other cities had made the most of the traders using the two important trading routes between Egypt on one side and Babylon and Assyria to the north. The people were pursuing wealth and materialism rather than God, oppressing the poor, keeping money for themselves rather than caring for widows and orphans. They had also turned to idolatry, worshipping lumps of wood, clay or metal, and were even sacrificing their own children.

By the second Temple period, the pursuit of wealth and oppression of the poor were still well-established sins. Jesus challenged one young man to give up his wealth and become a disciple but it was too hard for the young man to do. Fear of man was still very present as the people had a very obvious enemy in the Roman army and governors. Self-righteousness was also a big problem: it's easy to feel good about yourself if you're comparing your life to the pagans who are oppressing you, the man in your town who is collaborating with Rome by working as a tax collector, or the woman who supports herself through prostitution. Throughout the gospels we see Jesus challenging the 'good' people to compare their lives against God's word, not against other people, to repent of their self-righteousness and hypocrisy.

Do we see any parallels here with our own nation, with the church in the West, with ourselves?

Secondly, Ignoring God's grief and warnings:

Part of the Sabbath readings for the Three of Destruction is Jeremiah 2. God pours out His grief to His people:

“What wrong did your fathers find in me that they went far from me, and went after worthlessness, and became worthless?...”

⁷And I brought you into a plentiful land to enjoy its fruits and its good things. But when you came in, you defiled my land and made my heritage an abomination....”

“¹¹... my people have changed their glory for that which does not profit. ¹²Be appalled, O heavens, at this; be shocked, be utterly desolate, declares the Lord, ¹³for my people have committed two evils: they have forsaken me, the fountain of living waters, and hewed out cisterns for themselves, broken cisterns that can hold no water.”

He has provided everything they need but they have turned away from Him and done everything He said not to do. He sent prophets to them, but the people covered their ears and went their own way. They preferred to listen to false prophets who told them what they wanted to hear.

In the time of the Second Temple, there had been several centuries without real prophets sent by God - there were some false prophets around - but then God sends first John the Baptist and then Jesus. Like Jeremiah and Isaiah, Jesus and John the Baptist warned the people: repent, turn back to God, act justly, do not oppress each other, show love to one another, walk humbly before God. We see this throughout the gospels both in parables like the Wicked Tenants and very direct warnings.

Many did believe and repent, but Jesus knew that the nation as a whole was unchanged. Most ordinary people just kept going in the same old ways, living their ‘best lives’ as they saw fit. When Jesus approached Jerusalem for the Passover for the last time, He was moved to tears at the sight of Jerusalem. He grieved for the city and all the people in it because He knew the nation had not repented or recognised Him as the Messiah and what the consequences would be. Luke 19 v 41-44 says:

“And when he drew near and saw the city, he wept over it, saying, “Would that you, even you, had known on this day the things that make for peace! But now they are hidden from your eyes. For the days will come upon you, when your enemies will set up a barricade round you and surround you and hem you in on every side and tear you down to the ground, you and your children within you. And they will not leave one stone upon another in you, because you did not know the time of your visitation.”

Thirdly, Self-reliance

When I was a toddler, one of my favourite lines was “I do it mine self!” Probably said very loudly, and possibly with a stamped foot. I’m sure it blessed my mother immensely. While I’d like to hope I’ve grown out of that attitude, I’m not sure it’s the case. It’s clear that adults can suffer from it too!

When Israel listened to the spies and were afraid to enter Canaan, God told them that none of them would enter the land at all. So immediately they decided that they would enter Canaan after all and set off to conquer the land all by themselves. (It’s amazing how the thought of spending the rest of your life in a desert can suddenly focus the mind!) Of course, it ended in disaster, many men were killed and they returned to the wilderness humiliated.

But of course they learnt that lesson...

In the time of the first temple, when Judah was threatened, some of the kings listened to God and obeyed him, but more did their own thing. They ignored the real prophets, listened to the

false ones and came up with a range of exciting ideas to protect the kingdom on their own, none of which worked.

But that time they had definitely learnt the lesson, hadn't they...?

Once again, in Jesus' day, the people preferred to believe false prophets and to put their trust in their own abilities. These false prophets were encouraging the people to believe that if they started an uprising against Rome, it would cause God to send His Messiah, forcing His hand: they would over-throw their oppressors and bring in the Messianic era in one fell swoop! Jesus grieved because He, their Messiah, was already among them but they refused to recognise Him. Only forty years after Jesus' death and resurrection, the Temple and Jerusalem were destroyed and the people were enslaved or exiled.

Fourthly, God's judgement and their exile

God had provided the Israelites with literal springs of water in the desert, with shelter and food. He promised them blessing upon blessing when they trusted and obeyed him.

But in all three situations, on the border of Canaan, in Judah and in Judea under the Roman occupation, the people wanted to ensure their own security and survival. Instead of fearing God and obeying Him, they gave in to fear of man, their own inclinations and tried to save themselves in their own way.

This wasn't just a one-off, God didn't bring judgement on a whim. This was decades, even centuries, of going their own way. They had thought that because God hadn't acted then they could get away with it. God warned the people that there would come a point when he would act. He didn't tell them when that would be, He just said repent and start obeying again or destruction would come. Tragically, they didn't believe Him.

Through their own disobedience, what they feared came true and they lost everything that they valued: their promised land, their homes, their families, their freedom, many lost their lives.

Lamentations records that, after Jerusalem fell to Babylon, the people who remain can't even collect water from their own wells or wood from their own forests. The people who once received fresh water from a rock, now had to pay their oppressors for it. To be continued...

We've already looked at four of the common strands for these events (disobedience, ignoring God's warnings, God's judgement and exile) but there is one more: God's promise of restoration.

Seven of Consolation

When the Three of Destruction have ended on Tisha B'Av, a new period starts: the Seven of Consolation. The mourning has lasted for three weeks, but their time of consolation is much longer, a whole seven weeks. The Sabbath readings turn to the later passages of Isaiah, starting with Isaiah 40:

Comfort, comfort my people, says your God. ²Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that her hard service is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

God judged and punished the nation. He has dealt with their sin, forgiven them and will restore their relationship with Him, he will return them to the land and he will restore Jerusalem. He is not grudging about this, He promises tenderness and to restore double what they had.

Zechariah prophesies to the returning exiles:

“Thus says the Lord: I have returned to Zion and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem, and Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the Lord of hosts, the holy mountain.... Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of great age. ⁵ And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.”

What a beautiful promise for those who saw the destruction as children. The Babylonian exile that Isaiah and Zechariah witnessed only lasted 70 years. The judgement in AD70 was much heavier because the people had rejected their Messiah: their exile is continuing even now and the loss of the Temple, their meeting place with God, is still a raw wound.

The Seven weeks of Consolation start with Tu B’Av, this Tuesday. This day is traditionally connected with the day that the last of the disobedient generation died in the wilderness. It is a day of joy as the Jews remember that their ancestors could finally enter the promised Land.

This joy is for the past but also for the future as the Jewish people still look ahead to the coming Messiah, the return to Israel and the rebuilding of the Temple. Some are already making new vessels for the future third Temple. (It is this tension between many Jews’ desire to rebuild the Temple and others’ desire to prevent it which causes some of the trouble in Jerusalem today.)

Tu B’Av is also the equivalent of St Valentine’s Day, a day for single people to meet and fall in love or get engaged: both looking ahead to the joy of marriage but also symbolising the relationship between God and His people. We can have that special intimate relationship with God now but also see its fulfilment in the future when Jesus returns.

In John’s vision in Revelation, he saw “ “a new heaven and a new earth,” for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away, and there was no longer any sea. ² I saw the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride beautifully dressed for her husband.” No longer the broken down, burnt out city, but a glorious new creation.

So what can we draw from these two commemorations:

Get the boat back in the water

When we sin, we shouldn’t wallow in misery or give up, we should repent and start obeying again. As Alice said a few weeks ago, we should put our boat back in the water and start rowing.

Zechariah records an incident when the people had returned to Jerusalem. A group asks if they should continue to mourn for the three weeks as they had during the exile. God responds to the whole nation: who are they fasting for? Are they fasting for God? What He wants is not prolonged mourning but their obedience: He told them what they should do when they lived in prosperity and He repeats it now they are in poverty:

“Dispense true justice and practice kindness and compassion, to each other; and do not oppress *or* exploit the widow or the fatherless, the stranger or the poor; and do not devise *or* even imagine evil in your hearts against one another.” Zech 7

Beware false prophets and do not give in to fear

Jesus warned his disciples that life would get very difficult for them before His return. He warned them: “Watch out that you are not deceived. For many will come in my name, claiming, ‘I am he,’ and, ‘The time is near.’ Do not follow them. ⁹When you hear of wars and uprisings, do not be frightened. These things must happen first, but the end will not come right away.”

We can easily be frightened by the things that we see in the news or grasp at any positive messages we see – there are false prophets even today. We should Jesus’ words and put our trust only in Him, not giving in to fear.

Remember, God has a plan and gives us hope

The loss of the Temple was devastating to the people in AD70, but God had already prepared a way through. He provided an eternal High Priest for us: the priests in Jerusalem were killed or exiled but Jesus is in heaven always interceding for us. The loss of the Temple sacrifices is no problem for God because Jesus is the ultimate sacrificial lamb. He died once for all. We do not need to travel to the Temple several times a year to meet with God. Through Jesus the Messiah, we can have a direct relationship with God right here, right now, with His Word living in our hearts and His living water refreshing us.

There will be times of mourning and grief throughout life, and sometimes we will be called to fast too. But these times will not last for eternity. God promises that even the days of fasting will be changed: “The fasts of the fourth (month, that is 17th Tammuz), fifth (month, that is 9th of Av)... will become joyful and glad occasions and happy festivals for Judah. Therefore love truth and peace.” (Zech 8 v 19) This isn’t just for Jewish people, because God promises that gentiles (that’s us) will join in these celebrations. And there will come a day when “God shall wipe away all tears from their eyes; and there shall be no more death, neither sorrow, nor crying, neither shall there be any more pain: for the former things are passed away.”

Many of the people who first heard the comforting words of Isaiah or who first read John’s revelation would have witnessed the destruction of Jerusalem. Their trauma was very great but the comfort and hope that God provided was even greater. The period of destruction and exile were long, but the time of consolation and joy will be so much longer.

As David said at the dedication of the first Temple:

“For his anger lasts only a moment, but his favour lasts a lifetime; weeping may stay for the night, but rejoicing comes in the morning.”