

17th September, Matins

Ezekiel 20:P 1-8, 33-44 and Acts 20: 17 – end

Mother Emma

The two main speakers in our readings this morning, the prophet Ezekiel and St Paul the Apostle, may, to modern ears, sound startlingly uncompromising in their desire to share the truth of God's word, even when this might seem unpalatable or painful. Both see clearly the risks which human nature poses to the society of the godly – the temptations or "idols" of the world, in whatever form they come.

In the Hebrew Scriptures, or Old Testament, such temptations generally take the form of foreign gods, a literal form of idolatry. Ezekiel reminds his listeners of the times when the people of Israel have turned away from him, worshipping false idols first in Egypt, then in the wilderness, and in countries to which they have been exiled (for Ezekiel's listeners, this meant Babylon). Although he doesn't spell this out, he refers obliquely to that moment in the wilderness when Moses goes up Mount Sinai, to receive the tablets of the Law from God, and the people waiting for his return grow bored, restless and cynical about the God whom Moses follows, and decide to create their own god more quickly in the form of a golden calf. Ezekiel speaks of God's anger against his people when they turn away, seeking instant gratification, rather than waiting with hope and patience for their God to act; yet he also concludes that in spite of their failures and unfaithfulness, the Lord will keep his covenant with them and bring them back into the Promised Land.

Our reading from the Acts of the Apostles documents Paul's final words to the leaders of the church he has established in Ephesus, before he leaves for his trial and eventual death in Rome, an outcome which he appears to face with serenity and courage: *"None of these things move me, neither count I my life dear unto myself, so that I might finish my course with joy, and the ministry, which I have received of the Lord Jesus, to testify the gospel of the grace of God."*

We cannot fail to hear in Paul's words the ring of sincerity and absolute commitment to following Christ and sharing the Word with others, which has dominated his life and led him to sacrifice all else to achieve his purpose. But like Ezekiel, Paul also sees risks and temptations for his flock; for him these may not be carved idols, but may be others, *"grievous wolves"* who will try to turn their minds away from Christ, and who may even spring up from amongst their number, *"to speak perverse things and draw away disciples after them."*

The desire for personal power and adulation could tempt human beings to compete with the teachings of Christ which Paul has brought to them. Paul reminds the Ephesians of the seriousness of his teaching, *"[for] three years I ceased not to warn every one night and day with tears"*. He longs for them to understand the importance of single-minded adherence to their new lives in Christ. He reminds them that the Way of Christ is demonstrated in a form of life which does not covet wealth or riches, which seeks to support the weak, and to be givers, rather than takers, *"It is more blessed to give than to receive."*

Both stories are firmly set in a particular time and culture – Ezekiel amongst the exiled people of Israel in Babylon; Paul in the city of Ephesus in Asia Minor under the Romans – yet there is so much

which can be taken from these texts and translated into equally uncompromising questions for us to ask ourselves as modern Christians in 21st-century London.

Who and what are the idols, the abominations, the “*grievous wolves*” and “*perverse teachings*” of our own society? What is it today which might tempt Christians to seek power, or wealth, or instant gratification at the expense of their faith? Do we remember that we are called to serve the Lord with all humility of mind, caring for the weak and being givers, not takers, in our world today? And how do we understand our relationship with God? Do we exist to serve and glorify him, or are we sometimes tempted to think that he is there primarily to help us?

The somewhat wry opening of the Word of the Lord through Ezekiel, which notes the apparent arrogance of the elders of Israel, might remind us that we sometimes appear only to seek God when we are in need and remember about him. And what are the risks and temptations for us when we take our minds off God and are sucked into the culture around us?

Wealth and security appear just as alluring today as they did in Biblical times; equally we see the often-terrifying effects of the lust for power all around us and across the globe. The cult of celebrity today is sometimes as disturbing as the cults of carved idols, as people abandon faith, principles or morals to achieve fame, believing “There’s no such thing as bad publicity”.

News headlines instinctively feature shock and horror and abuse; rather than praising the many people who go about their daily lives being kind and principled, responsible and faithful. They don’t make for eye-catching headlines, and yet in Paul’s writing, this life is precisely what Christ asks of us. When the desire for wealth, or fame, or instant gratification draw us away from the whole-hearted, single-minded desire to follow Christ, living out his life of compassion and mercy in the world, then we become those who follow after idols, against whom Ezekiel and Paul are warning.

No-one is suggesting that any of this is easy. Our human brains are wired to follow the crowd, just as much today as two or three thousand years ago.

Yet we can turn to God, and as Paul says to his fledgling church, we can commend one another to him, “*and to the word of his grace, which is able to build you up, and to give you an inheritance among all them which are sanctified.*” Amen