

Making all things new - the spirit of rebuilding

Zechariah 4: 1 - 10

Revelation 21: 1 - 14

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Cathedral worship at Christ's College Chapel



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God of all mercy and might, guide us as we seek your meaning for our lives, and show us in this shattered city a glimpse of your new heaven, and your new earth.

As I read and re-read the passages from Zechariah, and from the John who wrote the Book of Revelation, I discerned a common thread. Not only does it run through both these passages of scripture. It also runs through the story of Canterbury in the last nine months, and stretches into the future, in ways we can't yet see. Zechariah wrote about the activity and presence of God, in the project to complete the Temple in Jerusalem. And John, in the last chapter of Revelation, sets out his exalted vision of a new Jerusalem, a restored and spiritually recharged city, coming down from heaven, to replace the old, ruined, lifeless city. How powerfully these themes and images speak to us, in quake ravaged Christchurch. Last weekend, our City Council held a large-scale expo, inviting everyone who turned up the opportunity to set down the mosaic pieces, in word and diagram, out of which a larger vision for the city's future will be constructed. We are all being invited to dream of a new city, safer, greener, smarter, more people-friendly, neatly laid out for the new age of prosperity and wellbeing.

And yet, the symbolism of God's presence is not rejected. Everywhere I go in this city, and also in Kaiapoi, in my home parish, folk are saying "the cathedral must be restored, or rebuilt," or reconstituted in a new way that keeps its symbolic power intact. This is often coming from those who never darken a church's doorway; indeed from those who say they don't like so-called organized religion. It is also coming from those whose homes have been damaged or destroyed, and whose streets and parks and water mains have been torn up. Looking beyond their own immediate needs and suffering, they recognize how important it is to the soul of the community, for the cathedral to rise again. For many Cantabrians, Christian or not, Anglican or not, it has become a virtual article of faith that the cathedral shall rise again, and reassume its place at the heart of the city.

There's a bigger picture, of course, that takes us beyond the cathedral. Many dozens of city and country churches, of different denominations, have been destroyed or damaged. They are symbols of a power beyond ourselves, of the presence of our Creator in our local communities. Each is the spiritual home of a faith community, a gathering that Bishop Desmond Tutu calls "the hope of the hopeless, through the power of God" and "a forgiving community of the forgiven." These are symbols that challenge the shallowness of consumer culture. They remind us that, central to our lives are relationships – first of all with God, and after that, with one another. Our communities feel desolate, when their spiritual symbols have been knocked over. Whether these sacred buildings are restored, piece by piece, or rebuilt anew according to the most modern architecture and artistry, we need them around us. We like to know that they are permanent. They help to anchor us in the world that God made, and point us to the heart of the maker.

For the people of Israel, following the devastation visited on the city of Jerusalem by the armies of Babylon, restoring their Temple was of massive importance. The prophet

Zechariah, in the passage we heard from chapter four, in vivid images wrote about God's word to Zerubbabel, the great temple-builder. "Not by might, nor by power, but by my spirit, says the Lord of hosts." Yes, God is saying, through Zechariah, you, Zerubbabel will complete the temple. But it won't be through your strength or political influence. It will be by my Spirit – the Spirit of God. It's the same Spirit – the Hebrew word is ruach – which swept over the face of the waters when God was creating the earth. The rebuilding of the Temple, in other words, will be a work of God in creation. Zechariah is speaking to reassure Zerubbabel and the other temple builders that they will succeed. The Temple will be finished. But only, Zechariah implies, because God is in the work – God wants it to happen. And that was because the Temple was the house where God chose to dwell, with God's chosen people.

But there will be a "great mountain" of opposition. It came from those who believed that the Temple was too expensive or difficult to rebuild. Conflict was also stirred up by those who had rival plans, and competed for the glory and status of working on Jerusalem's most sacred site. But, says the prophet, because the work is God's, this opposition will be flattened. "O mountain ... before Zerubbabel, you shall become a plain." It's a companion image to one made famous by another prophet - Isaiah – "every valley shall be lifted up, and every mountain and hill be made low." Words of strong encouragement, not only to the temple-builders, but to all the people of Israel. Don't lose heart – God is in the middle of this enterprise - join in what God is doing! There is a larger vision here, too. Zechariah, as a true prophet of God, can see beyond a building. In his line of sight is a restored Israel, a light to all the nations; just as God gave to Israel the image of the lampstand. It had seven golden bowls, each of which had seven lamps on it. This lampstand is an enduring image that God is with God's people, through all their trials, shining light on the darkness of their struggles and despair.

Well, can we compare the Temple in Jerusalem with the Anglican Cathedral in Christchurch? No, we can't; nor should we think of suggesting that God wants Christchurch Cathedral to be rebuilt, at the expense of the Cathedral of the Blessed Sacrament, or of any other place of worship that has been laid low. The temple builders of Christchurch, or Hororata, or Lyttelton, or Governor's Bay, or Glenmark, will need encouragement from our Zechariahs, and the skill and determination of the Zerubbabels who will set about their inter-denominational work of restoring and reconstructing. They will face their particular mountains of difficulties. These may include: competing visions; complaints about expense and extravagance; and insurance hassles. The local vision of rebuilding a particular place of worship may run headlong into a bigger picture debate, about whether that church should be rebuilt at all, or whether a centre of worship should be relocated elsewhere. Simply rebuilding what was lost is unrealistic. How sacred space is arranged for 21st century worship will be different from what we have known. Disaster can turn into opportunity. We can commission our Zerubbabels to build safer, stronger, more user-friendly churches, with more flexible worship and community space. The churches of the New Jerusalem will reflect the needs and aspirations of a new millennium.

But the discussion must always be larger than buildings. What use will dozens of new or restored churches be to us, if the people don't want to use them? The first priority for Canterbury's Christian people, must be the state of their faith. Making all things new is not mainly about buildings. It is a vision of renewed faith, from which we gain the hope and energy to refocus our lives, and reconstruct our city in a new way. Just as Zerubbabel could not rebuild the Temple in his own strength, so the rebuilding of the cathedral, and of all the other damaged holy places, will need to be powered by a large infusion of God's Spirit. There is a huge reservoir of spirit in Canterbury. We have seen it in the resilience of traumatized people, in acts of courage and self-sacrifice, in a wonderful supportive community spirit, in countless acts of practical caring, that express the love of God. In bold and imaginative ideas, in deep compassion, in the desire to regain those sacred spaces, we sense the Spirit of God hard at work, in our very midst. Thanks be to God, for giving us in such large measure, the Spirit of renewal, like the gift of water from the spring of life.

Yes, the damaged cathedral is acknowledged as the city's most important architectural treasure as well as its most iconic symbol. Not long after the February earthquake, Mayor Bob Parker said "there is some discussion that that is a building we would rebuild brick by brick, stone by stone. We need to find some symbols of that." How reassuring that our number one civic leader treasures the cathedral so much. But as we consider the building's future, We need also to reflect on why it is so central to the city's restoration. It is more than an icon. It is more than an impressive and beautiful neo-Gothic structure. It is more than a defining image of the city on thousands of postcards. It is the house of God in the heart of the city. Like the Temple of which Zechariah wrote so passionately, it will not be restored because the mayor wants it to be, or even because the Dean does – and I know he is as passionate about reconstruction as was Zerubbabel. It will rise again from its ruins because that is what God wants. The Spirit of God will guide each community of faith to rebuild or remake its sacred space; or else, it will not happen. But there is a picture bigger than buildings. That is the picture of our faith in God.

For many, I suppose, that faith has been tested out by the earthquakes and their destructive effect. After such massive tragedy, some of the worst damage has been to people's emotional and spiritual wellbeing. Because of the faith that powers them, the churches have been hard at work providing reassurance, comfort, practical help, and a kindly listening ear. Some of the Church's most immediate work, is to offer hope, compassion, and constant prayer, as suffering people come to realize that God, in Jesus Christ, is with them. God has never left us, and continues to dwell with us all. Reconstruction of buildings is a sign of God's new age for Canterbury. But it is not the final end in view. May the Spirit of God first restore, renew and refresh our faith. Then may that same Spirit empower the rebuilding of the cathedral, and of all the damaged sacred places, and of all our damaged communities.

Mighty and compassionate God, give us we pray the faith to believe, when you say to us:

"See, I am making all things new."