

The God who sees

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[0 : 0 0] Today's reading, as Mark has said, is from Zechariah, chapter 1, beginning at verse 1, and it's on page 958. So that's Zechariah, chapter 1, verse 1.

In the eighth month, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Ido, saying, The Lord was very angry with your fathers. Therefore say to them, Thus declares the Lord of hosts, Return to me, says the Lord of hosts, and I will return to you, says the Lord of hosts.

Do not be like your fathers, to whom the former prophets cried out. Thus says the Lord of hosts, Return from your evil ways and from your evil deeds.

But they did not hear or pay attention to me, declares the Lord. Your fathers, where are they? And the prophets, do they live forever?

But my words and my statutes, which I commanded my servants, the prophets, did they not overtake your fathers? So they repented and said, As the Lord of hosts purposed to deal with us for our ways and deeds, so he has dealt with us.

[1 : 3 8] The second reading this morning is continuing in Zechariah, chapter 1, starting at verse 7.

On the twenty-fourth day of the eleventh month, which is the month of Shabbat, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah, the son of Berechiah, son of Iddo, saying, I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse.

He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen, and behind him were red, sorrel, and white horses. Then I said, What are these, my Lord?

The angel who talked with me said to me, I will show you what they are. So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, These are they whom the Lord has sent to patrol the earth.

And they answered the angel of the Lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, We have patrolled the earth, and behold, all the earth remains at rest.

[3 : 0 3] Then the angel of the Lord said, O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem, and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these seventy years?

And the Lord answered, Gracious and comforting words to the angel who talked with me. So the angel who talked with me said to me, Cry out, thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease.

For while I was angry, but a little, they furthered the disaster. Therefore, thus says the Lord, I have returned to Jerusalem with mercy.

My house should be built in it, declares the Lord of hosts, and the measuring line should be stretched out over Jerusalem. Cry out again, thus says the Lord of hosts, my cities shall again overflow with prosperity, and the Lord will again comfort Zion, and again choose Jerusalem.

And I lifted my eyes, and saw, and behold, four horns, and I said to the angel who talked with me, What are these?

[4 : 30] And he said to me, These are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem. Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen, and I said, What are these coming to do?

He said, These are the horns that scattered Judah, so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nations, who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah, to scatter it.

And I lifted my eyes, and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hand. Then I said, Where are you going?

And he said to me, To measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width, and what is its length. And behold, the angel who talked with me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him, and said to him, Run, say to that young man, Jerusalem shall be inhabited, as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it.

And I will be to her a wall of fire all round, declares the Lord, and I will be the glory in her midst. Up, up, flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord, for I have spread you abroad, as the four winds of the heavens, declares the Lord.

[6 : 04] Up, escape to Zion, you who dwell with the daughter of Babylon. For thus said the Lord of hosts, after his glory sent me to the nations who plundered you.

For he who touches you, touches the apple of his eye. Behold, I will shake my hand over them, and they shall become plunder for those who serve them.

Then you will know that the Lord of hosts has sent me. Sing and rejoice, O daughter of Zion, for behold, I come, and I will dwell in your midst, declares the Lord.

And many nations shall join themselves to the Lord in that day, and shall be my people. And I will dwell in your midst, and you shall know that the Lord of hosts has sent me to you.

And the Lord will inherit Judah as his portion in the holy land, and will again choose Jerusalem. Be silent, all flesh, before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

[7 : 16] Harry, thanks very much indeed for reading to us. Do please keep Zechariah open on page 958. It's a great time of the year, this isn't it? I mean, August is good, holidays are good, but it's a great time of the year when the church family is back together once again.

So why don't we pray and ask for God's help as we gather around his word this morning. Let's pray together. Return to me.

Heavenly Father, we praise you that you are indeed the living God. We thank you that you speak to us. And we pray, therefore, this morning, that you would grant us eager hearts.

Please would you teach us, instruct us, we pray for each one of us, that we would return to you this morning. And we ask it for Jesus' sake.

Amen. Well, as Mark said, today we're starting a new series of talks in Zechariah. We looked at it in our growth groups, many of us, back in the summer.

[8 : 25] And I'll say it's a great book to be studying for two reasons. First of all, because it's a difficult book, which perhaps you may be thinking is not the most encouraging way to start. But it seems to me it's important that we are challenged to read and study difficult books of the Bible.

And there's a good thing to do, rather than perhaps just to kind of stay with the books which are more familiar. The second reason is because it's an important book. Zechariah is quoted in the New Testament, second half of the Bible, around 70 times.

And of those 70, 25 of them are around the death of Jesus. In other words, if we want to understand the death of Jesus better, if we want to see more clearly how the death of Jesus fits into God's big plan for his world, then actually Zechariah is a brilliant book to be studying over the next few weeks.

Now, if you turn to the outline on the back of the service sheet, you'll see I've put the structure of the book there, just for those who want to get their bearings. It's a very simple book, two parts.

Part one is six, is a number of visions, eight visions that God gave Zechariah all in one night. Part two is made up of two speeches from God.

[9 : 47] And you'll see there's a timeline, just so we can kind of get our bearings in terms of where we are in Old Testament history. You'll see that Zechariah there, almost on the far right, is towards the very end of Old Testament history.

We've had the golden age under David and Solomon, the exile. God's people have now come back, many of them from exile in Babylon. The city walls of Jerusalem have been rebuilt.

And the big project of the moment is the rebuilding of the temple. And the big idea of the whole book is that God will accomplish his purposes for his world.

And it's because he will accomplish his purposes for his world that we are to return to him. It's how the book begins, isn't it? We read verses 3 and 4 of chapter 1 earlier.

Return to me, says the Lord God of hosts, and I will return to you. God will accomplish his purposes for his world.

[10 : 53] We needn't be in any doubt about that. So return to me, says God. And I take it that to live any other way, therefore, is utter folly, isn't it?

And that's something that is true for all of us. Those of us here this morning who are believers of Jesus, as well as those of us who are perhaps more sceptical, and just looking in on the claims of Jesus, so to speak.

Our culture says, doesn't it, that we can believe what we want to believe. And of course that assumes either that God doesn't exist, or that God does exist, but he has no involvement at all with his world.

But Zechariah confronts us with the God who does exist, and who is involved in his world. Which means, of course, it's foolish, isn't it, to live our lives as if God doesn't exist, and as if he doesn't have plans, and as if my ambitions are more important than his.

So that is Zechariah's ambition. That is his agenda for us over the next few weeks, to see that God will achieve his purposes for his world, and therefore to line our lives up with what God is doing, rather than to be people who kind of live our lives following our own agenda, and to be those who live our lives lined up with what God is doing in his world.

[12 : 21] After all, Zechariah's favourite way of describing God is that he is the Lord God of hosts. That's a rather odd thing.

We don't kind of use that word very much, do we? But that word hosts literally means armies. In other words, God is the God of the armies. God is the all-powerful God who can do whatever he wants to do in his world.

We went to the National Gallery a few months ago as a family, and we were captivated, or at least I was captivated, by a series of paintings about the Napoleonic Wars 200 years ago, and they were enormous, and the details in them were just staggering.

And typically, on one side of the painting, you'd have a French commander, and behind him, for as far as the eyes could see, armies.

Tens of thousands of miniature soldiers. And you might say, why don't you have that French commander? He is the Lord of the French armies. And then on the other side of the painting, you'd have Wellington or someone like that, and behind him, again, as far as the eye could see, armies.

[13 : 33] And you might say, the Lord of the English armies. Well, God wants us to grasp that he is the real Lord of the armies.

The one who has the power of all the generals and all the armies of the world. And therefore, that what he says will happen, will happen.

What he says comes true. So, will we return to God? Will we align our lives with what God is doing in his world?

That's the issue of the book. That's what we're going to be thinking about, both for these next four weeks, and then in November, as we look at the second half of the book. And I take it as a great question to ask in September, isn't it?

Perhaps especially, as we kind of, you know, set our sights. Do you do that? Do you kind of set your sights on the next three months or the next nine months or so in September? It's a great question to ask at this time of the year.

[14 : 36] Because the essence of human nature, you know, all of us naturally drift away from God, don't we? We drift away from his priorities. It may be that some of us are very conscious of that this morning.

That actually, just over the summer, while it perhaps has been lovely to go away on holiday and to have a sort of change of routine, actually you're conscious just that you've drifted away from God. It may be that others are unaware of it.

But if the truth be told, we are miles away from God. Or perhaps you're just looking in on the Christian faith this morning. Well, whoever we are, the issue is the same. Will we return to God?

And so today we're looking at these first three visions of the book. And you'll see there two headings on the outline. First of all, chapter 1, verse 7 to 17.

The world is at peace and God's purposes look unfulfilled. Now, Zachariah's visions are not dreams.

[15 : 38] They don't stem from Zachariah's imagination. Have a look at chapter 1, verse 7. On the 24th day of the 11th month, which is the month of Shebas, in the second year of Darius, the word of the Lord came to the prophet Zachariah.

In other words, these dreams, each one represents God speaking. They are dreams given by God himself.

They are also self-interpreting. By which I mean with each dream, with each vision, we need to look for the interpretation we are given.

Because the danger is that we'll kind of read these visions. And some of them, well, like the first one here with this horseman, they're extraordinarily vivid. And they get our imaginations racing, which they are meant to do.

But the danger, of course, is that we try and work out for ourselves what they mean. Whereas actually, in each case, God gives us the interpretation. So we're to picture and imagine the vision.

[16 : 47] But then we see what God tells us the interpretation is. So let's have a look at the first vision, chapter 1, verse 8. I saw in the night, and behold, a man riding on a red horse. He was standing among the myrtle trees in the glen.

And behind him were red sorrel and white horses. So that's the vision. Now look at the interpretation. Then I said, what are these, my lord?

The angel who talked to me said to me, I'll show you what they are. So the man who was standing among the myrtle trees answered, these are they whom the lord has sent to patrol the earth.

And they answered the angel of the lord, who was standing among the myrtle trees, and said, we have patrolled the earth. And behold, all the earth remains at rest. Now the Persian emperor of the day would have used mounted horsemen to patrol his empire.

They reminded everyone as they went throughout the empire that he was in charge. He was the emperor. Just as Boris uses traffic cameras to patrol his empire to remind everyone who is in charge.

[17 : 56] But these horsemen don't belong to the emperor. They belong to God. He has sent them to patrol the earth.

And as such, it's a wonderful picture, isn't it, which stops us kind of putting God in a box. Isn't it easy to do that? You need to kind of bring God down to our size, to imagine that the reason he's there is to fulfill our own ambitions and our own desires, as if actually we are the ones who are at the centre of the world.

But no, it is God who controls the world. He is at the centre, and he sees everything as these horsemen go out on patrol. And how does God see the world?

Verse 11. Behold, all the earth remains at rest, at peace. Well, that sounds pretty good, doesn't it?

How we long for rest. How we long for peace. But the surprise is that this rest is bad news. It's not good news.

[19 : 10] It's bad news. Verse 12. Then the angel of the Lord said, O Lord of hosts, how long will you have no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you have been angry these 70 years?

Peace is bad news. This angel is indignant at the peace in the world, because God's purposes remain unfulfilled. At Jerusalem and the other cities of Judah look like building sites.

And the nations that invaded them and carried off God's people into exile are at peace. See, the most extraordinary thing is not so much the world's hostility towards God and his people, but its total indifference at peace, at rest.

In his autobiography, Richard Branson describes how in the 1990s he was considering whether to attempt to navigate around the world in a hot air balloon.

And he describes the thrill of it like this. He says, As I try to imagine a setting off around the world in a hot air balloon, I realise that our balloon flights have been some of the greatest adventures of my life.

[20 : 29] But next is the real giveaway. As he says, During the rest of my life, I'm in control of my destiny.

Smug, confident, indifference in his rejection of his creator. And no doubt, tomorrow morning, if we had to interview people as they go off to work or to school, we'd find it, wouldn't we?

Exactly the same attitude. The world is at peace. Indifference to its rebellion against God. Pursuing its own dreams. Pursuing its own ambitions. And of course, when the world looks so complacent, that is very discouraging, isn't it?

For God's people. Being involved in God's work doesn't look worth it. We find ourselves asking the question, Well, is it really worth returning to God? Is it really worth trying to line up my life with what God is doing?

Wouldn't I actually be much better off doing my own thing instead? After all, each day in Jerusalem was a dreadful contrast between a humiliating presence and a glorious past.

[21 : 42] A glorious past before the exile, when Israel under King David and King Solomon had been a great power, the envy of the other nations. People flocked to Israel. A wonderful place to go.

But Judah in 520 BC, as Zechariah writes, was a far cry from that. And although God's people, many of them, had returned from exile, they were living in this tiny province, no bigger than the size of Greater London, with just 50,000 people surrounded by an enormous empire.

It looked very unimpressive. What's more, during the exile, God had made great promises that he would once again dwell with his people in a new temple.

The promise that once again there'd be a great nation with all the nations coming to the new Jerusalem. But very little of what they expected had been realised.

Verse 12 of chapter 1, again, How long have you no mercy on Jerusalem and the cities of Judah, against which you've been angry these 70 years?

[22 : 56] Won't God keep his promises? Won't God do what he has said he will do? And I guess like then, we can look to the past.

We can open our Bibles. We can read, can't we, how wonderfully in the past God has acted supremely in sending his son, Jesus Christ. We can look at his death.

We can look at his resurrection. We can think of the promises he's made to his people. But then actually, as we look around us, as we look around at 21st century Britain, actually being a Christian can look for a very unimpressive concept.

Very unimpressive. Indeed, if we're here this morning and we're kind of investigating the claims of the Christian faith, so to speak, it may be the very kind of unimpressive nature of the Christian life that puts us off.

The world is at peace. God's promises look unfulfilled. Why bother returning to God? Well, secondly, chapter 1, verses 18 to chapter 2, verse 13.

[24 : 08] God will accomplish his purposes. Just look for a moment how that first vision continues, verses 14 and 15. So the angel who talked to me said to me, cry out, thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion, and I am exceedingly angry with the nations that are at ease.

For while I was angry but a little, they furthered the disaster. God is jealous for his people and angry with the nations.

And those are the two thoughts that control these next two visions. As we see that God will accomplish his purposes, both for the nations, but also for his people.

And both of them are powerful incentives to return to God. So let's have a look at each one in turn. First of all, God's purposes for the nations, chapter 1, 18 to 21.

Because we see here that the peace that Zachariah sees at the moment will not last. God is angry with the nations, those nations which took his people into exile.

[25 : 26] And now he explains their fate. Have a look at verse 18. I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, four horns.

And then we have the explanation for the vision. Verse 19. Now I said to the angel who talked with me, what are these? And he said to me, these are the horns that have scattered Judah, Israel, and Jerusalem.

Then the Lord showed me four craftsmen. And I said, what are these coming to do? He said, these are the horns that scattered Judah so that no one raised his head. And these have come to terrify them, to cast down the horns of the nation who lifted up their horns against the land of Judah to scatter it.

Can we see the horns of the nations that invaded and exiled God's people? But God is saying he will judge the nations. Which is a wonderful thing, isn't it, for them to hear?

Because, of course, despite their return from exile, in reality, most of God's people are still scattered. And they're living in this tiny little province surrounded by the Persian Empire, which still looks so very powerful.

[26 : 44] And it raises the question, well, who is going to call the nations to account for what they have done? And we can do the same, can't we?

You see, we can look at our world, and it can look, as we look at our world, as we, you know, you read the papers, you watch the news, you hear news from others, it looks, doesn't it, as if, well, what is God doing in the world?

If God is king, why does the world remain as it is? Why is it that the people and nations scoff so often at God's plans?

There was an article in the Evening Standard last week about the staggering number of people in London who had jumped bail. Apparently, there are 5,000 people on the run. And I discovered that one of them was a friend of mine at school, who I haven't seen since I was at school, I hasten to add.

And this article was expressing outrage. You know, what are the police doing about it? Who's in charge here? The criminals? It's easy, isn't it, to think like that when we look at our world.

[27 : 55] Is God really in charge? Well, here in verses 19 to 21 is the assurance that we need. God is in charge. He will judge. And strangely, the instruments of judgment are craftsmen.

They must have looked very unimpressive beside the horns. But the craftsmen, I think, are most likely the temple builders. Where they arrive to start rebuilding the temple, it's as if they're putting the world on notice that God's plans are on track, that God does rule his world, that he will bring to judgment those who oppose him.

And similarly, as God builds his temple today, not a building, but his people, the church, founded on Jesus, he is putting the world on notice as the church grows across the world, in some parts of the world, spectacularly quickly.

In China, much of South America, much of Africa. as God's people engage in God's work, even here in London, why it demonstrates that God rules the world, that his plans are on track, that he will accomplish his purposes for the nations, and yes, there will one day be a judgment.

That is the first reason to return to God. The second reason is in chapter 2, God's purposes for his people. But again, before we have a look at it, just look back at chapter 1, verse 14.

[29 : 37] The angel who talked to me said to me, cry out, thus says the Lord of hosts, I am exceedingly jealous for Jerusalem and for Zion.

God is jealous for his people. He demonstrates an intense concern, jealousy for them, because they belong to him.

And such jealousy is really just another name for love. And there is great security, isn't there, in being known that you are loved by God with this kind of love.

There's a lovely picture in one of the papers last week of a wild monkey in the jungle in Indonesia. which had adopted a domestic cat, which apparently had been dumped by its owners.

And then the two of them were together. And apparently the monkey is fiercely protective of the cat, fighting off intruders, keeping away humans, keeping away other animals.

[30 : 39] Fiercely protective. Well, that is the sort of loving, protecting, passionate jealousy that God has for his people. And God is atoned to prosper his people, which we see then in this third vision in chapter 2, verses 1 to 13.

It's a vision of the new Jerusalem once God's people have finished building it. In verse 1, there's a man with a tape measure.

Why don't I read verses 1 to 5? And I lifted my eyes and saw, and behold, a man with a measuring line in his hands. Then I said, where are you going? And he said to me, to measure Jerusalem, to see what is its width and what is its length.

And behold, the angel who talked to me came forward, and another angel came forward to meet him and said to him, run, say to that young man, Jerusalem shall be inhabited as villages without walls, because of the multitude of people and livestock in it.

And I'll be to her a wall of fire all around, declares the Lord, and I'll be the glory in her midst. It's rather funny, isn't it?

[31 : 52] You know, along comes the surveyor with his kind of tape measure. He's going to kind of measure everything up for Jerusalem. And what does the angel say? You don't need one of those. This is going to be a city that's far too big to measure, because so many people are going to be in it.

A city indeed surrounded by a wall of fire. Wonderful picture of God protecting his people. A city which God himself will live in, verse 5.

I'll be the glory in her midst. It's clearly no earthly city, is it? I take it, it points to the heavenly city and the new creation.

Just keep a finger in Zechariah and turn on to the very last book of the Bible to Revelation chapter 21. Like Zechariah, so Revelation assures us of the final direction of world history.

And it ends just as these opening visions of Zechariah end. In chapter 20, you have the final judgment being described. chapter 21, chapter 21, the new Jerusalem.

[33 : 09] Why don't I just read the first five verses of chapter 21. Then I saw a new heaven and a new earth. For the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and the sea was no more.

And I saw the holy city, new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God, prepared as a bride, adorned for her husband. And I heard a loud voice from the throne saying, Behold, the dwelling place of God is with man.

He will dwell with them and they will be his people. And God himself will be with them as their God. He will wipe away every tear from their eyes and there shall be no more.

Neither shall there be mourning, nor crying, nor pain any more, for the former things have passed away. And he was seated on the throne and said, Behold, I am making all things new.

It's a glorious picture, isn't it? Of God dwelling in the midst of his people in the new creation. And therefore it's not surprising that coming back to Zechariah that this third vision ends with a command to return to God.

[34 : 30] Chapter 2 verse 6, Up, up, flee from the land of the north, declares the Lord. It may be that some of the people hadn't yet returned from exile. Perhaps they were sort of settled in Babylon and they were happy there.

No return, God says. Chapter 2 verse 7, Up, escape to Zion. God is concerned for our spiritual safety.

He's concerned for your spiritual safety. That we are right with him. And then verse 13, a command to all people, be silent all flesh before the Lord, for he has roused himself from his holy dwelling.

God has roused himself. Isn't that a glorious picture? He stands ready for action. temptation. When you read the paper, when you look at colleagues, when you glance around the classroom, the school gate, or the tennis club, as you look at countless complacent faces, it does not look as if God's purposes for his world will be fulfilled.

And I take it that when we think like that, the great temptation at best is simply to become discouraged, isn't it, in the Christian life? at worst it's to ignore God or confine him just to a little corner of my life.

[35 : 59] But God says to each one of us, don't look at the world around you, listen to my words, I will accomplish my purposes for the nations and for the people, return to me, make sure that your life is consistent with what I'm doing in the world.

And over the next few weeks we'll see what that is. Let's pray together. The word of the Lord came to the prophet Zechariah.

Heavenly Father, we praise you very much for these first two chapters of Zechariah. Thank you that you tell us things and show us things which we simply could not know. By turning on the telly and looking at the world in which we live.

We praise you that you are the Lord of all, that you see everything. We thank you that your purposes will be accomplished. We're sorry, Heavenly Father, when we doubt that, when our lives deny it.

And so we pray that you'd give us clear convictions about what you're doing in the world and that our lives would reflect it. hope and we ask it for Jesus sake.

[37 : 18] Amen. Amen.