

January 4th 2009: "What the heck is an Ebenezer?" 1 Samuel 7:2-17

I want to tell you this morning a story from the history of God's people, the Jews. It comes from the time when God had set up Judges to rule over what had become a very disobedient and undisciplined people. They were still widely acknowledged as the people of Jehovah, and saw themselves in that role, but in practice they were far from that description.

The last but one Judge, before Saul became the first king, was Eli. He was also the High Priest in the land. But Eli was old and weak, physically and spiritually. He had appointed his two sons as priests under him and they not only made a mockery of their position, but were more heathen in their practices than godly. They treated the office of the priesthood as a means of material gain and perverted it in order to satisfy their own sexual lusts. Finally God said enough was enough. He sent a prophet to Eli and informed him that a dreadful punishment would come upon his sons and Israel.

But at the same time God declared such a terrible judgment, He was also preparing the next deliverer for His people. (John Wesley: Billy Graham) And you children here this morning would know the story I'm sure, of a little boy that God woke up 3 times during the night, in order to speak to him. His name was ??????? Samuel
And God gave to Samuel exactly the same message of coming judgment, that Samuel was to give to Eli.
And when Eli heard that message, he knew, and soon everyone else knew too, that God had spoken to Samuel.

I guess it was a few years later that this terrible judgment fell on Eli, his sons, and Israel.

The men of Israel decided that they were powerful enough to go and fight an enemy that had become quite menacing. The Philistines, and edged on no doubt by the sons of Eli—priests of God—they mistakenly believed that Jehovah was with them.

They were in for a shock. They lost a battle they expected to win. (sounds a bit like the Dockers)

At the debriefing that followed they decided they needed more God power on their side, so they reckoned they would take their God into battle with them.

But unlike the other nations they had no image of their God, but what they did have was something called the Ark of the Covenant. An elaborate box as you can see from this model, that had one cherubim at either end, and in the middle was the mercy seat; where God met with His people. This was so holy that it could not even be moved without God's say so.

But for those men, it was simply a sacred relic which would give them power in battle. They lost the battle, and the sacred ark was captured, both of Eli's sons were killed along with 30,000 foot soldiers. When Eli got the news he knew what a disaster it was. He collapsed and died.

Unfortunately no one else realised the extent of the disaster in spiritual terms. They were on the knife edge of God's judgment and they didn't know it. So the Nation continued to disintegrate spiritually. By now Samuel is doing his bit. He is getting himself established as God's prophet. Trying to create schools of prophets. But it's hard and discouraging.

As far as the ark is concerned. That stays with the Philistines for 7 months and causes so much grief that they send it back into Israel. They know and respect its power, so they take special precautions. The Israelites are so far from God that they treat it very lightly, and suffer terrible consequences. Finally its put into the care of people who were obviously more aware of God than most. And they looked after it in the way that the symbol of God's covenant with them should be looked after. And God blessed them.

For the next 20 years it stayed there and no one really cared. The people continued to worship other gods and idols. As far as Jehovah was concerned, they were spiritually bankrupt.

Samuel was working really hard and yet for 20 years he saw no great changes in the people. They refused to change their ways. Refused to turn to God even though the Philistines were a constant source of pain and suffering. Samuel called them to change their ways and trust in God alone for deliverance. But the majority ignored him, and gave those who listened to him a hard time. Spare a thought for Samuel and for Pastors through the ages who have endured something similar.

Then after 20 years the miracle happened. Suddenly the people realised that there problems were self inflicted. That the reason for the chaos in their country. The problems within and the problems from without was because they were far from the Lord.

So they began to be sorrowful because of their sins. Because of their behaviour and the way they had treated God. And they came to Samuel as a people seeking after their God. Willing to do all what was needed to get their lives back where God wanted them to be.

They wanted a new beginning

Most of us have been in that place too.....haven't we
When we turned to Jesus for our NEW BEGINNING. Perhaps it was the moment we first became a Christian. Or when we were baptised. Or maybe when we returned to the Lord after being away from Him.
Perhaps right now is your new beginning , as you decide this morning to accept God into your life....your situation. To trust Him and to follow Him as you have never trusted or followed any one ever before.

As far as the Israelites were concerned a new beginning meant a new start. A turning away from wrong things in their lives and a decision to seek that which was right. So they came en mass to Samuel. They drew and then poured out water before the Lord. A symbolic act of cleansing themselves in His presence with the cleansing that they knew only He could give. And together they fasted and they confessed their sin.

And then the trouble really started. The Philistine forces realised they had a chance in a thousand to truly wipe the Israelites out for ever. Here they were all together for some religious ceremony—vulnerable and unprotected. So this massive army came to attack. The people's new beginning was immediately under threat. Yet though they were scared and fearful, the people did not flee. Something new happened. Together they encouraged Samuel to keep on crying out to God to rescue them. And Samuel did, but not in a panic. He took the lamb he had prepared and offered it as a burnt offering. An offering that shows homage: submission to the will of God. Then he cried out and the Lord answered

The Lord thundered with loud thunder against the Philistines. Sent them into such a panic that the Israelites easily defeated them. In fact so massive was their defeat that they never again attacked during the whole of Samuel lifetime.

It was after that, that Samuel took a huge stone and set it up as a memorial to what had just happened. And he called it Ebenezer which means—stone of help. And he said, Thus far has the Lord helped us.

Why did he do it. So that every time they saw it these people who had commenced a new beginning with God, would remember how God has helped them and continue to trust Him.

The song we sang just before has the verse:

We too need an Ebenezer stone. A reminder of what God has done for us. A testimony to His great faithfulness as we move into 2009. I heard of some Christians who actually got one of those round white stones and set them in their house as a constant reminder. Another put a large rock outside his property as his Ebenezer, so that every time he drove in or out, he would remember to whom He belong, and all that God had done for him. You may like to get a stone and write a verse on about the way that God has rescued you.

But surely our Ebenezer is this communion feast. The symbols---the bread and the wine—are a constant reminder of what Jesus has done for us, and of the trust we too can put in Him for our future. For He is the rock upon which we have chosen to establish our lives.

The Ebenezer Samuel erected was also to be a place of recommitment to the New Beginning. An acknowledgement that the future can only be lived when our trust is truly in Him and our lives are lived by His power; in His strength.

That's why this morning communion happens now. And on this first Sunday of the year the elements will not be brought to you. But instead, as a sign of your commitment to Jesus. As a recognition of this remembrance feast as your personal Ebenezer. We invite you, as your personal act of commitment, to come and to take the bread and the wine together and return to your seat. To proclaim your trust in God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, as your Saviour, Master and Lord as you begin with us, this year of our Lord 2009.

