

# Playing in the Market Square

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*Reflections on Zechariah 8.4-5*

## **Zechariah 8:4-5**

*Thus says the LORD of hosts: Old men and old women shall again sit in the streets of Jerusalem, each with staff in hand because of their great age. And the streets of the city shall be full of boys and girls playing in its streets.*

## **Introduction**

This paper arises out of the 5<sup>th</sup> Godly play lecture that I was invited to give at Carrs Lane Church, Birmingham on the 3<sup>rd</sup> December 2011. It is my usual style not to attempt to give the last word on anything but to raise questions, explore ideas and to leave threads hanging for further reflection and response. In this particular context – that of an annual Godly play lecture - it is even more appropriate than usual to do this and to provide a form of ‘theological Godly play’, in that I seek to explore a passage (in this instance Zechariah 8.4-5) with the express intention of leaving plenty of room for further wondering about the significance of the passage in our own contexts. As a result, this is not the paper that was delivered at the lecture but my own written up reflections after its delivery. It takes some of the ideas on further and in particular incorporates some of the, frankly brilliant, observations and thoughts that emerged in the plenary session after the group discussion.

## **A Vision of the End Times.**

Zechariah 8.4-5 falls in the section of the book which looks forward to God’s future intervention in the world. Many scholars believe that it is set right at the start of the post-exilic period, the disaster that prophets like Micah, Isaiah, Jeremiah etc... had been prophesying for years had overtaken them. The temple had been destroyed by the Babylonians and now they looked forward to a time when they might return to the land and begin to rebuild their shattered lives. Zechariah 8 looks forward to a time when Judah will be restored. Two key hopes mark this time:

- that God will return to Zion and dwell once more in the midst of his people (‘Thus says the LORD: I will return to Zion, and will dwell in the midst of Jerusalem; Jerusalem shall be called the faithful city, and the mountain of the LORD of hosts shall be called the holy mountain.’ **Zechariah 8:3**).
- that God’s people will be returned to the land and city they loved, where they could once more worship God (‘ Thus says the LORD of hosts: I will save my people from the east country and from the west country; <sup>8</sup> and I will bring them to live in Jerusalem. They shall be my people and I will be their God, in faithfulness and in righteousness. **Zechariah 8:7-8**).

It doesn’t take great observational powers to note that Zechariah 8.4-5 falls between these two short passages of Zechariah. What this means is that Zechariah’s vision of old men and women sitting with their staves and boys and girls playing in the market place sits in the middle of his bigger

overarching vision of God and God's people returning to each other. In other words, Zechariah's vision in 8.4-5 is a part of his larger vision of the end times, a time when God would return to his people and the world would be as God yearned it to be. It would become a world marked by peace, joy, hope, freedom and love. God's people and the land they lived in would be freed from oppression.

Zechariah's vision of the future is vibrant and optimistic, as indeed was the vision of many of the post-exilic prophets writing at the start of this period. As time went on, however, the vision was pushed further and further into the future, as the people experienced constant oppression, poverty and, at times, despair. By the time we get to the New Testament period, this kind of hope for the future was pushed far off into the era marked by the ending of the old creation and the beginning of the new creation. Rabbinic tradition calls this time 'the world to come' which they contrasted with this world, the one we live in now. As a result, at the time of Jesus, while this belief was still strongly apparent, people now believed that it would come only after a time of climactic change and divine intervention, normally in a world newly created by God.

One of the striking features of many of the writings of the New Testament, is that their authors believed that the end times had broken into the present at the birth, death and resurrection of Jesus. Although they still believed that there would come a time when this world as we know it would come to end and be replaced by a new heaven and earth, they also believed that the new creation had begun to break in now. Part of the Christian vocation is to live as though this is the case, to live as though the new creation is already present in the world.

This becomes important for our reflections on Zechariah 8.4-5 because it means that our aim as Christians should be to attempt to live in such a way that Zechariah's hope for the future becomes a reality; that we are called to attempt to live out, both in our Christian communities and in the wider communities in which we live, this vision of the elderly sitting with staves in their hands and children playing in the streets.

## **The Marketplace**

This therefore challenges us to reflect on this passage in more detail and to work out what implications it might have for the way in which our communities work. The first point to notice is that to our modern ear, the desire for children to play in the streets sounds dangerous in the extreme. Although when I was a child, the majority of children 'played out', this is no longer the case today. Playing in the streets feels like a perilous venture that we may wish to prevent our children from engaging in. Some people may want to challenge these cultural norms and the idea of 'safety' that lies behind them but this passage, actually, has different emphasis than simply children playing in the streets.

Part of the issue is the translation of the word used. The Hebrew word used here refers to a very particular type of street. This was not the usual streets that run between houses but a wide open space, or plaza. In the Ancient world these open spaces were used for all forms of gathering but particularly for trading or other forms of business. The open spaces were the ancient equivalent of the business district and were the places in which important decisions were made, transactions were enacted and debates conducted. Zechariah's vision, then, has the elderly and the young at the heart

of the life of the city or town in which they lived. It is a vision of inclusion in which old and young together were present in the place where important decisions and transactions were made.

It is also interesting to note that in that place, at the heart of the community's life, the elderly were to sit each with a staff in their hand. The staff here is important. In the Hebrew world, the staff was a marker of respect and so denotes the respect given to a person by the society in which they live. Zechariah's vision here envisaged the elderly of his community receiving respect by virtue of their age. In the open spaces, both old men and old women were to sit holding the marker of the esteem in which they were held by their community. Alongside them, the boys and the girls played. This offers a vision of an integrated community in which the elderly do what they do (i.e. sit with staves in their hands) and the young do what they do (i.e. play in the open spaces) and that both do this together, side by side at the heart of the community in which they live.

Zechariah's vision issues a challenge about how and where we make decisions in our communities. Here old and young alike are to be found, doing what is appropriate for them, right at the heart of the community. So often when we provide space for children to play, or places for the elderly to sit, they are separated off, placed out of the way of the 'action'. Zechariah's vision here has them all, old and young sitting where the most important decisions were made, where business was conducted and trading happened. They were not ushered into a corner but sat with respect at the heart of their communities. This challenges us to think again about where we provide spaces for children or the elderly to be in our communities and to ask whether we exclude the elderly and young from our decision making processes simply by the space we give for them to be. A community shaped by Zechariah's vision here would be an all age community in which decisions were made with all members of the community present (even if some of them were playing!).

## Playing

Another issue raised by Zechariah 8.4-5 focuses around play. The Hebrew word for play here has the resonance of jesting or laughing. The Hebrew language has a mood, known as the piel which refers to intensity. This is used here so the implication is that there will be an intensity of enjoyable laughter or jesting. Intriguingly the word is also used to describe David's outburst of joy before the ark of the covenant in 1 Chronicles 13.8 ('David and all Israel were dancing (playing?) before God with all their might, with song and lyres and harps and tambourines and cymbals and trumpets.') The value of this is that it communicates the joy involved in their dance and in the children's play. You only have to listen to the joyful babble made by children, in for example, a school playground, to understand the deep connection between play and joy.

The connection made in the plenary session following the lecture was between this verb and what wisdom does in Proverbs 8. In this iconic passages, personified wisdom records being a witness to God's act of creation at the dawn of time saying 'then I was beside him, like a master worker; and I was daily his delight, rejoicing before him always, rejoicing in his inhabited world and delighting in the human race.' (Proverbs 8:30-31). At first glance, it may not appear that there is much connection here between Zechariah 8.4-5 and Proverbs 8.30-31 until one looks at the Hebrew text and realizes that that the word used for play in Zechariah 8.5 is the same word used twice over for wisdom's rejoicing in Proverbs 8.30-31. Thus we might translate Proverbs 8.30-31 as 'playing before him at all times; playing in his inhabited world'. Wisdom then played first in God's created world,

the children of Zechariah 8.4-5 when the world is once again as God yearned for it to be would play as wisdom had done at the dawn of time.

It is also important to note that the Hebrew word is not always positive. On a number of occasions it would best be translated as mockery rather than play. Then as now joyful play can so easily tip into cruelty. So for example Proverbs 1.26 'I also will laugh at your calamity; I will mock when panic strikes you,' has this verb as cruelty rather than joyful play.

An interesting example of play gone wrong is given in Matthew 11.16-19

*"But to what will I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, <sup>17</sup> 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.' <sup>18</sup> For John came neither eating nor drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon'; <sup>19</sup> the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners!' Yet wisdom is vindicated by her deeds."*

which many New Testament scholars would view as being a commentary on Zechariah 8.4-5. If it is this is a perfect example of play gone wrong. Jesus' generation was a generation who had the chance to experience the world as God yearned for it to be. In the ministry of Jesus, God's kingdom had broken in. God had, in spectacular form, returned to the heart of his people. They had the chance to live out Zechariah's vision in practice but instead they sat around bickering, criticizing each other for not joining in with the game properly. So much so that they criticized John for the opposite of what they criticized Jesus for. The addition of the reference to wisdom in Matthew 11.19 can't help make one wonder whether in the face of the bickering that Jesus was facing, wisdom was silently yet joyfully still playing in God's creation as she has done from the dawn of time.

Again this vision issues a powerful challenge about whether, as communities who seek to live out the end times in the world today, we are more in tune with wisdom's joyful play at creation or with the generation of Jesus' day whose was marked by bickering and dysfunctionality.

## **Conclusions**

Zechariah 8.4-5 offers a rich yet challenging vision of what communities shaped by play might look like. It challenges us to think again about the extent to which we are communities which live out God's vision of the world as it could be now. It challenges us to reflect upon what might need to change in our Christian and non-Christian communities if we are to live up to Zechariah's vision of the old and young together doing what they do best at the heart of our communities. It challenges us to reconsider how our decision-making bodies might need to change to reflect such a reality. At the same time it summons us to join with wisdom's play, as she accompanied God in creation and asks us to look deep within to discern whether our lives reflect more of wisdom's joyful creative play or the bickering, dysfunctional mockery of Jesus' day.

Most of all, Zechariah 8.4-5 reminds us that play can and should take its place as a theme for us to discuss, explore and reflect upon in theological discourse.