

Kingdom Report

7 September 2019

Part 6 : Jerusalem and Nehemiah; Athens and Pericles

At the same time that Ezra and Nehemiah were rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple...Pericles was building the Parthenon and rebuilding Athens and Greek culture into "The Age of Pericles". There is a strategic lesson here for the Church.

There was something happening around the world at the time of Israel's return from Babylon to rebuild Jerusalem and the Temple. It is important to know this. It gives us valuable information as to what the Lord was doing on a strategic international level and how this informs our strategy as we plot the exit out of our world Babylon.

I discovered this important information reading Karen Armstrong's fascinating book **"The Great Transformation"**.

The front of the book says "The world in the time of Buddha, Socrates, Confucius and Jeremiah."

The back cover provides the more interesting information which will give you a better idea of why this was very important to me. I will quote it...

"The centuries between 800 and 300 BC saw an explosion of new religious and philosophical concepts. Their emergence is second only to man's harnessing of fire in fundamentally transforming our understanding of what it is to be human. But why did Socrates, Buddha, Confucius, Jeremiah and Lao Tzu among others all emerge in this five hundred year span? And why did they have such similar ideas about humanity?"

In The Great Transformation, Karen Armstrong examines this phenomenal period and the connection between such a disparate group of philosophers, mystics and theologians. It is nothing less than a global account of the time when religious belief as we understand it was born."

I differ with Ms. Armstrong in this...I would replace Jeremiah with Isaiah as her time frame stretches from Isaiah to Malachi (800-300 BC). Isaiah was the visionary prophet of that era for Israel in laying out the central themes of God's redemptive plans for mankind.

However you get the idea. During this critical period of Israel's history that we have been covering in this series....this was also the time when the religious and philosophical foundations were being laid for the entire world for the next 2,500 years of human history.

In this small colony of a remnant of His people God placed them in a very strategic location in order to make a statement to the world:

- This is who God is, this is the creator of mankind and the world.
- This is His divine revelation from His word as to how life is to be lived, the purpose of life...God's
- This is how you form a relationship with God, this is how you please Him.

Jesus took up this theme with...

"You are the light of the world, a city set on a hill cannot be hid..." (Math 5:14)

The Jerusalem that Nehemiah was rebuilding, the Temple and priesthood that they were restoring, the scriptures that Ezra collated and disseminated....all these were to be a light to the world...a city on a hill that cannot be hid.

Because while they were doing this Pericles in Athens was doing much the same thing...and a clash of civilizations was coming. It would be a clash of ideas, of theology, of truth, of a way of life, of government of destiny. And it would impact the history of Western Civilization for ages to come and the world and its economics and politics thereafter.

Athens of Pericles became the supreme idea of the Greek "ekklesia" as a new form of government "by the people, of the people, for the people". (the people here of course excluded women and slaves). They did a debt forgiveness, they created the idea of the dynamic "polis", a new form of city design, places for an "agora" (the common market), the religious district of temples that were the centre for banking and public record keeping (who do you trust with your money and your mortgage but the priest), the entertainment district for theater, schools for young people, a public forum for debates and a democratic voting system for citizen participation in civic affairs. a citizen army of volunteers eager to protect their way of life.

Here is what Wikipedia has to say of Pericles and his era....

"The period during which Pericles led Athens roughly from 461 to 429 BC is sometimes known as the Age of Pericles.....Pericles promoted the arts and literature; it is principally through his efforts that Athens acquired the reputation of being the educational and cultural center of the ancient world. He started an ambitious project that generated most of the surviving structures of the Acropolis (including the Parthenon), This project beautified and protected the city, exhibited its glory and gave work to the people. Pericles also fostered Athenian democracy to such an extent that critics call him a populist."

The period of the Age of Pericles which all historians recognize as the height of Greek civilization was exactly the time that Ezra and Nehemiah were doing their work in Jerusalem.

So why does history not record an "Age of Nehemiah"?

The people that came back to Jerusalem from Babylon in number were about the same in number that we know was the population of Athens at the time. The people of Jerusalem had a document they received from God through Moses that by that time was a 1000 years old...the Torah.

The Torah outlined a way of life very much what the Athenian Age of Pericles did....debt forgiveness, no king, a people's assembly to decide matters, the rule of law, private property, judges, a private volunteer army, sound money, emphasis on the family and family life, trade and good will to foreigners, etc.

And then in addition to a 1000 year old constitution of the state of Israel they had the prophecies of Isaiah that made it plain that Yahweh their God, who alone was God had given them a calling to all the people of the world to spread the knowledge of the Lord till it fills the earth....they were to be an international example to the people of the world of a way of life that leads to prosperity and blessing.

None of this happened. They never took their call or scripture seriously By the time of the last prophet Malachi you can see that the Lord had basically given up on that lot. He never spoke to them again for another 300 years until John the Baptist turned up.

In the meantime what happened....Alexander the Great happened. He with only about 30,000 men conquered the world coming out of the small city states of Greece. How did he conquer the world? Well he did some excellent tactical battles to beat the Persian but in reality most of the world like Egypt welcomed him with open arms.

Why? Because he came with the Greek world view of the polis and the ekklesia form of government. Alexander in his time built 23 "Alexandria's" including the famous one in Egypt. New city designs based on straight lines, squares, order, properly laid out for commerce, government, religion, entertainment. They came with a world view of freedom, commerce, culture, literature, the arts, education, philosophy....a common world language a common world culture.

But here is the important takeaway from this historical overview....

The Israelites missed the whole point of who they were, what is God's plan for Israel and what is God's plan for the world. But if those generations who came out of Babylon lost the plot....God sent His Son to start the world revolution all over again with a New Covenant and a New Israel and a New Jerusalem.

It is within this context of this historical narrative that you must understand the very important declaration of Jesus.....

"I will build my Church and the gates of hell will not prevail against them..."

Now throw out all your preconceived ideas of 'Church' and put in there 'I will build my Ekklesia....' which is the political/cultural/polis that Jesus was referring to that Nehemiah and Ezra could not convince the Jewish remnant to build...but which Pericles and Athens did build in order to create a world revolution molded on their human philosophy and their human desire for wealth and power and empire.

But here is the challenge of our times.....

There is this common view of world history that Western Civilization is founded on the age of Pericles. I have my dispute with that characterization...however lets accept a large part of that.

The problem is the parable of the wheat and the tares.

When God was busy sowing the seeds of His people in the exodus out of Babylon and rebuilding Jerusalem and the Temple....all to be a light unto the world and a city on a

hill....the enemy copied large parts of that light and example with a false counterfeit....Athens and the Parthenon instead of Jerusalem and the Temple. Athena and Zeus instead of Yahweh and His Messiah, Socrates and Plato instead of Isaiah and Jeremiah.

The seed that God sowed was trampled underfoot, was choked by the cares of the world, died for lack of depth.

And then God sent his Son....to sow new seed, His seed in the hearts of men.

But the vision of the polis/ekklesia, the city on a hill the city that is a light unto the world...that vision is still to be revived and lived out in the world. Because the world based on Greek democracy as politics, the world of Greek philosophy and Greek entertainment and sports and war and world empire of commerce and culture...that world of tares that look like wheat, that world built on sand....that world is falling apart.

And that is what we are facing here in South Africa....as you read the media headlines this last week of riots and looting and killings....when you read of dysfunctional and ineffectual political system, when you read about a looting oligarchy....then you must start to get really serious about the vision of the church as a polis/ekklesia....

And it is not just the Greek counterfeit that is failing. I have not even touched on all the other world religions that Karen Armstrong mentions that started up at the same time 2500 years ago. China is trying to crush Christianity among the people and turn China into a Confucius state. The Indian government is trying to turn India into a nationalist Hindu state. These will all fail on the rock of reality...the reality of God's created world that operates on His reality...not man's imaginations of what is reality.

If ever there was a time for a New Jerusalem and a New Israel that will take the Word of God seriously enough to create a living space that exemplifies to the world what a Kingdom of God culture is all about, what a Kingdom economy, Kingdom government....a city on a hill a light to the nations....then it is here in South Africa.

The wonderful thing about the time in which we live is that we can actually create that kind of living space which says here among us we will live according to God's laws. The technology is available to create that kind of virtual space.

There are key steps that must be taken to move into this new phase. We need to think creatively about how do we bring God's people together in each city to give them a place and a structure in which they can live out their gifting. We need to have new forums for new discussions by new thought leaders for creative approaches to culture, economics, arts, education, technology...based on God's Kingdom principles.

I want to tackle this next week with a revelation of the mystery of the 144,000 in the book of Revelation....probably one of the most abused and misunderstood sections of scripture. I think you will be surprised what it is really saying to our times.