

Trinity Baptist Church - Sunday 29th November 2020
Andy Banks - Isaiah 7:1-17 - The promise of Immanuel

Children, feel free to complete your activities, while I talk. We're taking a break from our series in Mark through Advent. Ron will bring his own message next week, but for my part I want to look at three Advent promises given in Isaiah, some 700 years before Jesus' birth, each of which finds its fulfilment in Jesus. We begin today in Isaiah 7:1-17 – I'm reading it all because the context is important to understanding the promise fully.

[Read Isaiah 7:1-17]

1When Ahaz son of Jotham, the son of Uzziah, was king of Judah, King Rezin of Aram and Pekah son of Remaliah king of Israel marched up to fight against Jerusalem, but they could not overpower it.

2Now the house of David was told, 'Aram has allied itself with Ephraim'; so the hearts of Ahaz and his people were shaken, as the trees of the forest are shaken by the wind.

3Then the LORD said to Isaiah, 'Go out, you and your son Shear-Jashub, to meet Ahaz at the end of the aqueduct of the Upper Pool, on the road to the Launderer's Field. 4Say to him, "Be careful, keep calm and don't be afraid. Do not lose heart because of these two smouldering stubs of firewood – because of the fierce anger of Rezin and Aram and of the son of Remaliah. 5Aram, Ephraim and Remaliah's son have plotted your ruin, saying, 6'Let us invade Judah; let us tear it apart and divide it among ourselves, and make the son of Tabeel king over it.' 7Yet this is what the Sovereign LORD says:

*"It will not take place,
it will not happen,
8for the head of Aram is Damascus,
and the head of Damascus is only Rezin.
Within sixty-five years
Ephraim will be too shattered to be a people.
9The head of Ephraim is Samaria,
and the head of Samaria is only Remaliah's son.
If you do not stand firm in your faith,
you will not stand at all."*

10Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, 11'Ask the LORD your God for a sign, whether in the deepest depths or in the highest heights.'

12But Ahaz said, 'I will not ask; I will not put the LORD to the test.'

13Then Isaiah said, 'Hear now, you house of David! Is it not enough to try the patience of humans? Will you try the patience of my God also? 14Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. 15He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, 16for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. 17The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah – he will bring the king of Assyria.'

[Pray]

Advent is a time of waiting. We wait – some of us with great anticipation – for Christmas Day, the celebration of the birth of Jesus Christ, born to be our Saviour. But Advent also brings more sharply into focus that we are waiting still for Jesus to return to this earth as he promised, not as a baby, but as the Lord of lords and King of

kings, when he will renew the earth to its original perfect design and initiate his everlasting reign of peace and love. This is the Christian hope for which we wait.

2020 has brought the need for that day into sharper focus, with its painful reminder that our life now is lived under the universal curse of sickness and death that God pronounced upon the world because of humanity's sin. Until Jesus returns, there will remain a constant cycle of darkness and light, of suffering and well-being. Right now, we find ourselves in a darker period, and so we wait for light to break in once more, for life in all its fullness to return. And this promise in Isaiah assures us that full life *will* certainly return. For this promise was given to God's people in a period of great darkness and distress.

A few centuries before this time, Israel had split through civil war into two nations: 10 tribes in the north, who retained the name Israel, but were also called Ephraim after their most prominent tribe; and two tribes in the south, who were called by the name of their dominant tribe, Judah, over whom King David's descendants still reigned. Ephraim had long since abandoned the true worship of Yahweh – the one true God. And now Ahaz has led Judah firmly down the same route, following the horrific gods and worship practices of the Canaanite nations. Furthermore, Aram (modern day Syria) had joined forces with Ephraim to try to counter the threat of the even more powerful Assyria. They'd tried to persuade Judah to join with them, and when that failed, they'd invaded most of Judah to make them join forces. Now they were back again, surrounding the capital Jerusalem. But Ahaz was trying to solve the problem by his own efforts, by securing the water supply for Jerusalem in case of a siege, and more significantly by seeking help from the far more powerful (and dangerous) king of Assyria – the Assyrians really were like the Nazi Party of the Old Testament!

Into that dark situation Isaiah is sent to speak to the evil king Ahaz. And he comes with a very practical message, which is both an offer and a challenge to Ahaz: will you put your trust in Yahweh God, or will you try to solve this problem by human effort? Contrary to all appearances, the *first* holds out the promise of life, while the *second* will bring only fear and destruction.

So, first, Isaiah pronounces a clear message to Ahaz. The feared invasion from Aram and Ephraim will not happen (v.7). Then he gives the reason – these kings and nations are nothing compared to God, mere smouldering stubs of wood, nearly burnt out already (vv.8-9). And so, Isaiah warns and challenges Ahaz directly (v.9b): “If you do not stand firm in your faith, you will not stand at all.” This is not merely a *personal* challenge to Ahaz. Rather, on Ahaz's response rests the survival of the whole of King David's dynasty. So, God, through Isaiah, also offers Ahaz a sign that will prove to him that God is both able and willing to help him (v.11).

But Ahaz refuses. He puts it in a very pious-sounding way (“I will not put the LORD to the test”), but this is far from a godly reaction. It is a twisting of Scripture to his own evil ends, a final refusal to trust in God, a rejection which tries God's patience beyond repair. You know, God *wants* his children to *ask* him for help. The Bible does say not to put God to the test – Jesus quoted it when tempted by Satan to misapply Scripture. But Jesus also says, “Ask and you will receive” (John 16:24). And certainly, if God *offers* a sign of reassurance, we sin by rejecting that sign, not by accepting it.

Therefore, because of his rejection of God, a sign of a different sort is foretold to Ahaz (vv.14-17): “the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel. He will be eating curds and honey when he knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, for before the boy knows enough to reject the wrong and choose the right, the land of the two kings you dread will be laid waste. The LORD will bring on you and on your people and on the house of your father a time unlike any since Ephraim broke away from Judah – he will bring the king of Assyria.”

In its original context for Ahaz, the sign of Immanuel stands, not as a comfort, but as a judgement. As often happens in biblical prophecy, the centuries are telescoped such that the sign appears imminent – here done to emphasise to Ahaz the nearness of the fall of Ephraim and Aram, and of the impending disaster that he will bring upon Judah by asking for help from Assyria instead of from God. Indeed, from this point onwards, Judah's kings would only reign as underlords of foreign powers until David's dynasty was finally ended with their exile to Babylon about 150 years later.

Thus, by the time Immanuel actually comes, when this prophecy finds its fulfilment in Jesus, the predicted disaster had well and truly come on Judah and on Ahaz's family. Jesus, Immanuel (God with us), and the great Messiah King from David's line, is born into a situation that does not look at all like kingliness. Born in a stable, in obscurity, in poverty, as is indicated in this prophecy by the diet of curds and honey – the basic diet of the sorry remnant left in Israel during the exile. David's throne is long gone. Israel is ruled by the foreigner, Herod, put there as a puppet king by the occupying Romans, who himself represents a dangerous threat to the Messiah's life. All of this resulted from Ahaz's rejection of God.

And yet, there is no way that God's purposes and promises could be thwarted by a mere man, like Ahaz! The sign of Immanuel may have been a pronouncement of judgement on his unbelief, but it is the most glorious offer of hope and life to all who will believe in Jesus! God will not let judgment be the final word for his world or his people. For the miraculous will happen: "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son." And yes, that is what this prophecy means. It is not merely a prophecy of a unknown young woman conceiving and giving birth – such a normal occurrence would hardly be a sign of any significance! Rather, God was informing his people centuries in advance that one day something would happen that would be totally unique and utterly impossible for humans to imagine, let alone achieve: "the virgin will conceive and give birth to a son." How? Scripture never tells us other than that the Holy Spirit of God overshadowed Mary and made her pregnant.

This is a vital, non-negotiable gospel truth. For this is the foundation for the Christian insistence that Jesus is both fully human and fully God at the same time. Jesus' immaculate conception and immaculate birth rule out any possibility that God merely joined himself to the human Jesus, or came upon him in some way, after his birth. No. From *conception* Jesus was both fully God and fully human. He was and is truly Immanuel – God with us in human form! God himself stepped down from his throne in glory and took on human flesh!

And he did so "not to condemn the world, but to save the world through him" (John 3:17). Like Ahaz, actually we all deserve God's judgement. But God became Immanuel to bring life not death, light not darkness, salvation not condemnation. The offer is held out to us as it was to Ahaz. We just have to do what he wouldn't do and accept God's offer of help!

And here's the other wonderful truth: since Jesus ascended back to heaven, he sent his Holy Spirit to everyone who trusts in him, so that we could experience God with us every moment of our lives – and forever! He is with us as we wait for Covid to be brought under control so we can once more meet with family and friends without the need for restrictions. He is with us if we face uncertainty about our jobs. He is with us when we encounter the suffering of sickness or the breakdown of our bodies. He is with us when we endure the pain of heartbreak or the betrayal of friends. God did not step into his world to quickly pass through it and leave us to struggle by our own wits again – he stepped into this world so that from that moment on his relationship with his people would be forever closer. This is the promise of Immanuel for all who will trust in him – "I am with you always, to the very end of the age" (Matt 28:20). Will you receive that promise this Advent into whatever you are going through?

[Pray]