

Reflection – Bible Sunday by Rev Steve Painting

Isaiah 55:1-11 & John 5:36-47

We live in a world dominated by marketing, advertising and product promotion. If we turn on our televisions, computers or phones we face a barrage of advertising. If we walk through the streets of our towns and cities we are confronted by giant electronic billboards, all claiming that certain products or services are necessary to enhance our already cluttered lives. Many of the claims made by advertisers and marketeers are either false or exaggerated. In most instances we are aware that this is so, but many advertising techniques are more subtle and we are lured into unrealistic expectations of what the product or service can offer. In many ways marketing has become a culturally acceptable form of deception. I suppose though, nothing has really changed across the ages. It is a basic weakness of the broken human spirit to be seduced by things that promise us the world but fail to deliver. In the days of Isaiah, it was no different. Speaking for God he asks the people of Israel, 'Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?' (verse 2). That question is sandwiched within an appeal for the people to come to the one who alone can satisfy. The thirsty need water and the impoverished need food, not cleverly disguised counterfeits. Isaiah is addressing the spiritually thirsty and spiritually impoverished, who have worked hard to find sustenance from things that promise much but deliver little. 'Come', he says, 'buy wine and milk without money and without cost.' 'Listen, listen to me and eat what is good and you will delight in the richest of fare' (verses 1 and 2b). The imagery is worth pondering. Did Isaiah's people realise they were thirsty, did they know that they had no money, or at least not the currency that would buy them what they really needed? Did they know that what they thought was spiritual bread, would not actually sustain them?

So what is God promising? Wine, in the Old Testament, was used as a metaphor for God's covenant blessing and milk implies physical nourishment that goes some way beyond basic food. It was almost a luxury item in his day. The image projects the call to the promised land, described in Exodus 3:8 as a land overflowing with milk and honey. To buy without money or without cost

though? Is that actually possible? Doesn't buying always involve some sort of trade or cost? I guess there is a cost in coming to God in the way that Isaiah demands. To live by God's ways, we have to give up our desire to live by our ways. That is perhaps what is involved for us here, in the process of buying, but in every other sense there is no cost. No effort is needed, nothing is spent. God's blessings are a gift of His grace. The point Isaiah is making is that inner contentment cannot be found through spending money and energy on the products and services that the marketeers and advertisers of this world try to convince us are necessary. Jeremiah describes it this way, 'My people have committed two sins: they have forsaken me, the spring of living water, and have dug their own cisterns, broken cisterns that cannot hold water' (Jeremiah 2:13). The more water that goes into a broken cistern, the more the cistern leaks. Idols such as material wealth, fame, status, achievement and success will never satisfy us. They will always leave us wanting more. This inability to ever be satisfied by the idols we serve, is at the heart of the move into poverty rather than prosperity. It is I think, the major contributing factor behind environmental degradation and wealth inequality.

God is, through both Isaiah and Jeremiah, making the same appeal to his people 'Come to me, don't be deceived by the adverts that the world throws your way. Live as I would have you live and then you will find satisfaction and contentment.' Isaiah puts it this way, 'Seek the Lord, while he may be found, call on Him while he is near. Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.' (verses 6-7). It is every bit as much a prophetic word to our time and culture as it was to the society that Isaiah addressed. If we are to find a way of living that really feeds us with the finest of fare, God has to be involved. It is a great mistake to believe that we can work out how to live well and prosper without reference to God.

All of which leads us to the theme of the day, Bible Sunday. If we wish to seek God, we cannot realistically do so without the help of the Bible. Through its pages, we encounter God in the stories of his dealings with humankind, and particularly through the life and ministry of his Son, Jesus the Messiah, whom

Isaiah points to in verses 3-5. Through the Bible God speaks to us, revealing his higher ways and his higher thoughts to instruct us in how to live. The Bible is a vital resource to help us in our efforts to buy wine and milk without money and without cost. Today it is more accessible to us than ever before and we must learn how to take advantage of that. The Bible can be read in many different ways and when reading is difficult there are audio versions of numerous languages and translations. The Bible should not be approached as if reading a story but in small but very regular portions. Time must be taken over its reading and it is helpful to go over the passage, several times if necessary, asking God to speak to us through its words. We have help from others too. We can look at passages together, as we did with this same passage from Isaiah, during last Monday's Morning Prayer time at Heanton, and as others do regularly in housegroups. There are now Bible commentaries available that are not merely academic and can help us find a practical application of the text in question. We still have copies of the Bible Society's 'Bible course' which gives an overview of the Bible and helps us navigate ways to identify and read its different genres. These weekly Sunday reflections are also available to download from our website in both audio and written forms. I hope that they help those of you who read or hear them as much as they do for those of us who prepare them. With this in mind, perhaps you might consider writing your own reflections, however brief, in a private prayer journal.

Our gospel reading however, strikes a cautionary note on how the Bible should be approached. Jesus is speaking to the Jewish leaders of his day and acknowledges that they are diligent in reading the scriptures. Yet despite that diligence they have not understood the scriptures. What hope have we then of understanding the Scriptures, I hear you ask? We are probably not as clever or as adept in study as they were. The Pharisees would have committed practically all of the Old Testament to memory. It is not though, about intellectual understanding. Jesus reminds them not to think that they have eternal life because of that knowledge. The scriptures, read and interpreted rightly, point to Jesus, for it is only in him that eternal life is found and these leaders rejected him.

The Jewish leaders were comfortable in their legalistic righteousness and were afraid of anything that might call that into question or disrupt their inherited way of life and the power they held in society as the 'religious experts'. Indeed, these leaders misused the scriptures to validate their own views and serve their own ideals and agendas. It is not unusual to see the same thing happening today. Harsh religious laws including misrepresentations of Christianity are applied by those in power to control and oppress society and to judge those that fall outside of a very narrow norm. Single verses from the Bible are regularly quoted, out of context, to give weight to certain opinions or judgments. We must be careful then when we refer to anything as biblical or unbiblical because our interpretation of the Bible comes with a cultural and personal bias. Please be aware that this reflection itself, is my personal take on the words of the Bible and subject to any biases I might have. I pray though, as always, that through my words, God might give us an authentic understanding of the passages in question and so reveal something of himself and his way for us in our time and context.

To summarise, Isaiah's words are I believe, a prophetic reminder of God's appeal to all people to find meaningful life. They are a reminder that we become increasingly impoverished on a physical, spiritual, social and material level if we choose to neglect our relationship with Him. If we choose not worship God we will instinctively worship other idols, idols that will never satisfy us. God's appeal through Isaiah, come to me, listen to me, seek me while I may be found, should, alongside other spiritual disciplines, lead us to the the Bible. We must approach the Bible though with humility, applying it not to serve our ends or promote our personal ideals and beliefs, but in a way that helps us to know Jesus better and follow his way more closely.