

Craigsbank Parish Church



Hope for the Future

A nine week sermon series preached on passages
from the book of Isaiah by Rev. Alan Childs
in May and June 2021.

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If hindsight is a perfect science, is foresight then not?

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 1:1-3; 5:1-7 and 2:1-5



You could ask me: “Alan, why would it be of any use to have a look at a book that is some 2600 years old that talked about prophecies that were given to kings and rulers, officials and citizens of long gone nations?”

That is a valid question. One about relevancy.

Allow me to ask you three questions that our society is wondering about at present.

1 - So this week we have the opportunity, even the responsibility, to cast our vote at the ballot box. One of the big issues on the table will be – should one support a party that promotes primary dependence on the United Kingdom, or one that supports primary dependence on the European Union. What do you think?

2 – Later this month the annual meeting of the General Assembly of the Church of Scotland will be meeting and some pressing matters will be considered, amongst others – Given the pressures on resources in our post-Christian society, what should the focus of the local parish church be, seeing as it cannot be everything to everyone?

3 – We are gathered as Christians, or followers of Jesus, as we share in this worship service, or this worship video together. But what makes our Jesus so unique, so different from other Gods or Saviours?

These three questions are very relevant to us here today:

Whom should we rather partner with as larger international partner in future: Brussels or Westminster?

What should the local congregation be focusing its limited resources on? and
What makes Jesus so special that he is worth our serious attention?

I believe that understanding the messages of the Prophet Isaiah will give us pointers, clues as to how to responsibly consider each of these three questions.

No, Isaiah does not answer these questions directly, but indirectly the issues that Isaiah addressed as spokesperson of God, and the way he addressed those matters, do give us some valuable principles that we would do well to bear in mind when answering those questions for ourselves.

Over the coming few weeks we will take a look at the greatest Old Testament prophet and the book that carries his name.

Whilst doing so, we will see that he had to advise his King on whom the nation of Juda should side with for protection – should it be with the Arameans, like their sister nation Israel did, or should it be with the Egyptians, or who knows, even with the Babylonians. For as a nation with only modest capacity they were desperate for international support, but whom to throw their lot in with. So our Brussels or London question is not so unique after all.

Over the next few weeks we will also see that the prophet Isaiah reviewed the religious and community welfare practices of the community of believers. He clarified for the Jewish “congregations” of his day what their focus should be on and what they would do well to let go of, at least if they wanted to claim to be the people of God, that is. So our General Assembly and our Kirk Session considering what God might want us as a church to focus on, is no new question.

And as for our claims of just how unique Jesus Christ is, amidst a multicultural, multi-faith society that is post-Christian, how does one answer such bold claims as ours. The book of Isaiah has some serious claims about how the saviour of humanity will act, how the eventual Messiah would be. Prophecies that were made many centuries before the birth of Jesus in Bethlehem. Prophecies that were referred to by the New Testament writers as proof of Jesus’ nature as saviour and messiah.

Which brings me to another important matter, when one looks at Old Testament prophets.

Did they actually foretell the future? Were they people who received visions about future events, whether imminent events, or events later into the future, or even events at the eventual end of time?

Some Bible scholars would say no. They only commented on the state of affairs and projected that if injustices or bad practices are not reformed, or stopped, then the eventual outcome will necessarily be bad for those involved. Like saying the wheels of justice might turn slow, but it turns nonetheless. In that sense, prophets acted as moral, social and religious gauges of the health of societies. Almost the way Bob Dylan calls social commentators to action in his popular song from the 1960s The times they are a’changing when he sings “Come writers and critics who prophesize with your pen and keep your eyes wide”.

Nowadays we might say that social justice activists take up that mantle of the traditional prophet of the Old Testament. Highlighting injustice, warning of negative repercussions if justice is not restored.

On the other hand, some of the events that Old Testament Hebrew prophets refer to, were at the time when the prophecies were made still far ahead in the future and involves fairly specific minutiae which then does come to pass. The odds of those “predictions” actually happening in one person would basically have been infinitely miniscule. And yet it did.

Now the Bible warns us against trying to foretell the future, warning against the dangers thereof. But simultaneously, the very Bible acknowledges the gift of prophecy and advises on how to discern between someone who prophecies under the direction and influence of God, and someone who does not.

You might also have had experience of someone receiving a clear vision or dream in preparation for a pending or future event. How else does one explain something like the following?

One morning some years ago a long-time friend of mine told me of a very vivid dream she had that was very unsettling. She said she had dreamt of hundreds of thousands of Asian people trying to get away from a flood by trying to climb up walls or clinging to the sides of buildings but most of them drowned because the wave was too big, the water too high. That was the morning of the 23rd of December 2004 she told me she had the dream the night before. The very next day the unexpected terrible Boxing Day Tsunami happened in Indonesia and surrounding countries indeed drowning hundreds of thousands of

people. In the news we saw haunting images of especially Asian people desperately trying, but failing, to escape the flood waters of the tsunami.

You could say, oh, but that was just a coincidence. Yes, you might say that. But it was not the first time it had happened so specific. I was studying a business degree in Johannesburg when our lecturer called us out of the lecture halls to come and see the shocking footage of the first plane that had flown into the first of the Twin Towers in New York on 9/11 back in 2001. Whilst looking in shock at the terrifying images and as the other plane flew into the second building I called that same friend at work to ask her to repeat to me what she had told me earlier that morning. For she had woken up and immediately informed me that something terrible was going to happen later that same day, as if it will be like the world would be coming to an end for many people, a deadly catastrophe with far-reaching implications. A few moments after I put the phone down the first of the twin towers collapsed and the so-called war on terror would soon follow.

Now before you phone my friend to ask her what the lottery numbers will be for next week. This type of very clear vision-like dreams has not happened with her since and did not happen to her prior to these events. But those two dreams were clear, vivid and she shared them with me with a deep sense of pending disaster and anxiety in both cases.

So as sceptic as someone would want to be about dreams and visions relating to future or pending events, the Bible states that it is possible and will indeed happen from time to time and should be handled with great care.

And Isaiah, which one was Isaiah of these two types of prophets was Isaiah the prophet, a vision-seeing recipient of divine revelations or an activist for social justice and religious reforms?

Both it would seem. Both.

He speaks on behalf of God, addressing injustices and doling out markers for the future – often about how God will act towards to his nation, either protecting them or taking his protection away from them.

The prophet Isaiah shares the intimate, heart-felt feelings of God towards his covenant people.

You might remember that we started in January with the patriarchs and matriarchs series, in which we learnt that God, Jahwe, made a covenant, a commitment with Abraham, which he then repeated to his son Isaac, and again to his son Jacob. A covenant in which God says – you will be my people and I will bless you. Your part of the covenant is to stay true to me as your God and to follow my guidance, my part of the commitment is to protect you and to bless you. The small tribe of Israel had settled in Egypt about 18 centuries BC.

In March we then looked at the Book of Deuteronomy, where we see these rights and responsibilities of the covenant Israel had with God, Jahwe, being spelled out in greater detail. What would or should a nation or society look like that follows the guidance, the laws of God? Having been freed from eventual slavery and oppression in Egypt some 400 years after they had arrived there. Moses had since led the tribe of Israel, which had by then grown into a proper sized nation, all the way to the verge, the boundary of the Promised Land. Deuteronomy was effectively like constitution upon which the nation of Israel should build their society once they settle in Canaan around 14 centuries BC.

From today we are taking a look at the Book of Isaiah, which was written from about 7 centuries BC. So we have fast forwarded about 7 centuries. In the meantime since the nation of Israel had arrived in Canaan they had driven out or defeated the previous inhabitants, settled, built towns and cities, had

formed a union of tribes into a nation under one king, first Saul, then David and then his son Solomon and so on and so forth. In the process they had established a ruling class, developed a judiciary and a religious order and become a political entity of significance.

As had their neighbours in the ancient near East. Egypt had for many centuries been an important military, political and economic nation, but over the centuries other nations had flourished from the Sumerians to the Chaldeans, from the Assyrians to the Babylonians and eventually the Persians.

And it is in the midst of these diverse ancient civilizations, each with their own gods and worldviews, their own identities and national ambitions, each having to feed an ever-increasing amount of citizens on a landmass and in an era when the weather and the availability of water had a significant influence, even as it does today.

When Isaiah then emerges onto the scene, a highly educated poet, probably well connected, possibly part of the ruling class, he does so 700 centuries after Israel had entered the promised land. By now they have had much time to become the society that God had called them to be. A society where life is respected, humanity treated with honour and compassion, where animals and nature are cared for amidst a culture of contentment, all the while acknowledging Yahweh, God, for his manifold blessings and ample protection. Well, that had been the ideal. But is definitely was not the norm.

Yes, there were glimpses of the Kingdom of God, a heaven on earth like state in society, but alas, more often than not, typical human vices like greed and conceit, vanity and fear would be at the order of the day. What followed was abuse of power, internal squabbles, a veritable stew of the powerful abusing the weak, the wealthy wanting more wealth at the expense of the poor, loyalty to the god they were in a covenant with being replaced by loyalty to other deities like Baal and Marduk and Ashtaroth.

No longer was the nation of Israel keeping the covenant commitments to their covenant guardian God. The very one who called them into being was slowly but surely being replaced by other deities, other loyalties and other values.

So enter Isaiah, like other prophets before him and others after him.

The three readings that the three members of the Hovey family shared with us form part of the introductory part of the Book of Isaiah, chapters 1 to 5. And these three are examples of the imagery Isaiah uses to share God's heart with his people.

What Elaine read to us is from Chapter 1 – where God and his covenant partner, his people, face off in a court case. A right real courtroom drama – think something like the TV series Suits. Complainants and defendants, judges, juries and lawyers. In essence, Jahwe is stating that despite his keeping his end of the legal covenant contract, Israel had completely breached their part of the contract.

The second reading which was read by Bryan, is from Chapter 5 – in which the relationship between the two covenant partners are described like that of an unrequited love. One partner having given his all, investing everything into this relationship, but the other partner not reciprocating. The metaphor that is used in this case is that of a vineyard which a farmer gardener lovingly builds up from scratch, caring and tending to it, but nothing – just nothing is produced by the plant. So the farmer is simply going to dismantle the whole venture, rip out the plant, resenting that he had invested so much time and effort into the ungrateful plant. Just like a jilted lover, the aggrieved lover decides is furious at the unresponsive, ungrateful partner.

The third reading that Anna read to us, is from Chapter 2. Here we see a much more positive picture. The

prophet paints a lofty vision of the future, God will bless all people, all nations, and this blessing from God will flow through the very people of God, from their capitol, Jerusalem, from the mountain of Zion. God's people will have returned to Him and He will not only bless them, but the whole world through them.

As you can see from these three examples, in essence the Prophet makes clear to his readers, his audience, that God desires a living, dynamic relationship with Him and how his people, or in our case, how we – you and I respond to the love and care and protection of God is important. The God we worship is not merely a force or a concept, but as People of the Book, as Worshipers of the Goad of Abraham, Israel and Jacob, as believers in Jesus Christ – we believe in a God that desires to be in a responsive, passionate relationship with us.

And the Prophet Isaiah, just like the Book of Deuteronomy and just like Jesus of Nazareth would say – the way you exhibit your love for God is seen and experienced in the way you love your neighbour, in the way you do unto others as you would want done to you.

It was thus in Ancient Israel, it is still thus today modern-day Scotland or wherever you are watching from.

Amen

The Crown's postie

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 6:1-10



It's funny how things have changed over the decades. Do you remember the time when, if you wanted to talk on the telephone you had to go to a phone that was confined to its place next to the wall, that place where the phonenumber came out of the socket and into the phone. And then someone thought, no, let's liberate the telephone from its confines so that it can follow us everywhere. Let's make phones mobile. Then we can be free to talk on the phone wherever we go. Sure, freedom for the telephone, but now we are confined. We are now in a place where we cannot get away from the telephone anymore because it seemingly demands our attention wherever we go.

It reminds me of a time when I was really young, a wee lad with a full set of blonde hair and lots of freckles. It was back in the 70s, I was playing outside in the garden with my toys when the telephone rang where it was tied to the wall in the hallway. So I ran, picked it up, answered properly like I had heard my mother and older siblings do. I felt quite adult with this big responsibility of receiving this incoming phone call. It turned out to be uncle James, an uncle of mine whom I loved and respected. He was glad to hear it was me, impressed by the fact that I had taken the responsibility as wee boy to answer the telephone. He was calling to speak to my mother and asked that I call her to the phone he needed to answer a query she had for him about a product they were stocking at his hardware store.

So I said, goodbye, left the phone off the hook as expected, ran to the side of the house I last saw my mum at, yelled out to her that uncle Jock was on the phone for her, and then ran back to my toys that were waiting for me to play with them again. I used to run everywhere when I was young.

About half an hour later whose car pulled up in our driveway? It was uncle James. I jumped up, went over and greeted him.

He looked at me a bit puzzled, and asked me if I had called my mum earlier to tell her he was on the phone to speak to her.

Oh, yes, I said. I did indeed call to her and told her he was on the phone.

Uncle James smiled and said, Right, I am sure you did. But did she reply or did I see her go over to the telephone? And then he said, You know what, Alan, I think the telephone is still off the hook because your mum never picked up the telephone.

So we walked over to where my mum was busy knitting a cardigan at her fairly noisy knitting machine. She greeted her cousin and looked surprised to see him, saying: I thought you were going to phone to answer my query. You did not have to drive here all the way from the shop. It's good to see you, let me

put the kettle on.

Uncle James replied – I did call, but it seems the message only got as far as the messenger.

As all three of us walked over to the phone I felt less adulty and more sheepish, for sure enough, there the phone was still lying on the table next to the receiver – waiting to be picked up. They had a good laugh and I had learnt an important lesson about making sure that the message does indeed reach the intended recipient.

In essence Isaiah was called to be a messenger with a message from God to be given to the people of God.

Here in Isaiah 6 we have Isaiah receiving his call – pun very much intended.

We witness in our mind's eye Isaiah being welcomed into the very presence of the Holy One, the Ultimate One, the Perfect One – the maker and ruler and sustainer of the universe.

Who then asks – who will be a messenger for me? Whom can I send to share my heart with my people?

But who is this Being that speaks, that has a message to share?

The language Isaiah uses is “I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple... When he spoke the very doorposts shuddered.”

The biggest building, the largest edifice known to Isaiah was the temple in Jerusalem.

No expense had been spared. By his standards and that of his peers it was impressively large, built for a God.

And what Isaiah says is – well, good luck, because the God I am looking at – is so much more impressive, that this enormous temple we built does not even have enough room for the hem, the seem of just his robe. No, this God is bigger, more impressive, more regal and majestic than we could ever imagine. Even the beings that surround him are indescribably awe inspiring.

No wonder Isaiah quakes and quivers and thinks he is about to die.

For not only is this God, this ultimate being immensely powerful and majestic, but this Being is holy, perfect, completely flawless, completely so very unlike we are.

Both Afrikaans and German have a word that captures some of this characteristic: *ganz andere* in German, *gansandere* in Afrikaans.

In essence it means the one that is so completely and utterly different from – different from who we are and what we are.

No wonder Isaiah is scared, frightened, fearful of dying because all his limitations, shortcomings, iniquities, sins, patheticness and failures make him realise how very unworthy he is to be in the mere presence of this uttermost being of sublime power and perfection.

Now bear in mind that in a culture where decorum was still a matter of life and death, where the regent determined access, and worthiness and privilege, and sacrifices were required to allow access into the presence of a god or a king or a ruler – Isaiah realised he was completely unprepared and unworthy of being in this throne room of the Most High.

It indicates a level of respect for authority.

But it also shows that Isaiah had proper perspective of his own insignificance and shortcomings in relation to the Most High. He had a real sense of awe.

Nowadays it is hard to find proper levels of respect for authority. Maybe in the military forces when a private comes face to face with a top ranking officer like a brigadier. Or maybe when a person from one of the lowest castes in India meets the Indian Prime Minister. Maybe when a young school boy who absolutely adores his football hero comes face to face with the real deal.

I am not sure we have such a deep sense of respect for authority anymore, at least not in contemporary western countries where the individual has become the supreme authority on his own life.

And as for awe. What would normally inspire us to be astounded, left speechless from the sheer realisation of our insignificance in comparison?

People used to be astonished by thunder and lightning, by earthquakes and solar eclipses. But now we know how these phenomena work, and we can more often than not predict them. We were amazed at nuclear power and at space travel and unlocking the human genome or in physics discovering the Higgs Boson particles and now even smaller particles. All of this is amazing, as is the birth of any baby or the realisation that the universe is actually immeasurably large containing literally innumerable stars. Now that is astonishing, but I fear, we are no longer astonished, hardly ever in awe anymore.

Yes, amused, even bemused, possibly even surprised.

But awestruck? Truly astounded?

When Jahwe, God, prepares the prophet with his message he tells Isaiah, don't fret that the people won't listen to you. Because they will not. You will tell them, but they will be unimpressed. And so for two or three generations Isaiah shares the heart of God with the northern nations of Israel-Samaria and the southern nation of Judah-Judea – and more often than not they don't listen.

He preaches hellfire and brimstone in an attempt to have them become a society that respects life, protects the vulnerable, and acknowledges God as the source of all blessings, but nah. Isaiah is met with much disinterest, more often than not. Sometimes they listen, but not until it's too late, so in 721 BC the northern Kingdom of Israel-Samaria is destroyed and later around 587 BC the southern Kingdom of Judah-Judea is destroyed.

Just like God had told him – go tell them, but they are generally not going to listen to you.

You know what we as humans are like, we might take note of a warning or of some guidance, but eventually we tend to return to self-centred ways, comfort and consumption, the strong ignoring the weak. Yes there is still a pandemic, but really, we are tired of being couped up, so lets go out and have a good time again. That's exactly what happened after the first wave, it's exactly what happened after the first wave of the Spanish flue was over and then the real calamity struck. We know the sea is choking in plastic, the air is smothered in CO₂, so our leaders get together for the Paris accord, just for big petroleum funders to enable the likes of the previous US administration to withdraw from the accord and step away from climate change commitments. Severely damaging our children and grand-children's future wellbeing.

Seems like big shocks, hellfire and brimstone, near disasters, even true disasters – despite changing our

lives, seldom change our hearts or our values or our loyalties.

No wonder Jahweh, God, goes back to the drawing board. The council of God and the heavenly beings seem to take a 400 year retrace it seems. Not really, but from the time the last book of the Old Testament is written, to the beginning of the stories in the New Testament, there is this almost 4 century gap. Silence.

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And then what? The small remnant of Jahwe followers, the small group of communities that still clung to this memory of the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob clung to what they remember the prophets had foretold centuries prior.

And what is it that the prophets had told them would eventually happen? What had they written down in their scrolls?

Well, it depends which of these remnant communities you asked. Different Jewish communities interpreted their ancient texts differently.

Some of the communities expected a continuation of the hellfire and brimstone theme, more punishment, more impressively holy and scary divine interventions, destruction like at Sodom and Gomorra, or destruction like that of Noah's generation. Sinners doomed to be cut down. The Qumran community went and hid in the mountains expecting the destructive end of days. John the Baptizer went into the wilderness and preached repentance or else destruction because the coming emissary of God was soon to arrive wiping away all sin. Talk of burning of chaff and tearing up of weeds was rife. The expectation was death and destruction.

But there was another lingering theme in the prophecies of old. One such theme was from the very prophet Isaiah. And as we look into his prophecies over the next few weeks we will discover and ponder some of these revelations he had shared with his people many centuries prior.

A golden thread in what I will call the tapestry of Isaiah's prophecies is the coming of the King. The King that will save the people of God. The King that will bless all nations. The King that will do mighty deeds. The King that will be from the bloodline, the house of King David.

But simultaneously this King will be gentle, will heal, will protect, will himself be broken. Will be born from a young maiden, will come from a disrespected area, will be misunderstood, mistaken and mistreated.

But simultaneously he will reign forever, he will be honoured by all nations and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Prince of Peace.

As a follower of Jesus Christ, I believe that all of these prophecies were actually fulfilled, and they were fulfilled in one person, and in only one person – Jesus, the son of Mary, born in Bethlehem.

Even John the Baptizer realized that, he realised it and refocused his followers' attention on Jesus as the Lamb of God, not the Lion of Judah, who would take away the sins of the world.

And do you know what's more – you, and I, are called just like Isaiah and just like John the Baptizer, to share this incredible news with an incredulous world.

And before you think you are not worthy to be an emissary of God, a modern day prophet sharing God's heart with your community. That's not an excuse, just like the angel touched Isaiah and made him worthy, so to the blood of Christ has cleansed you and me and makes us worthy to share the heart of God with our communities, with our nearest and dearest as well as with the strangers who are not yet our friends.

So I invite you for the week ahead, to go and seek the presence of God. Go and find that place, that time, where you can linger in God's presence, knowingly so, and search for that sense of awe that Isaiah experienced. Go and seek the holy of holies, the awesome God. Seek the presence of the one who flung the stars into space. Seek the heart of the one who flung open his arms in our place on the cross to take away the darkness in our souls. Go and seek the warm embrace of the parent's heart who welcome home the rebellious prodigal with arms flung wide open.

Our God has a message for you. Go and find out what it is.

Amen

I had a nightmare ... or was it a dream?

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 11:1-9



“God is love”, said Jesus. Says the divine Spirit within us. The God you and I believe in is a God of love. No, more than that. The God you and I believe in IS love.

For God is love.

This past week our world needed more love needed more of God.

The girls who were slaughtered at their school by three bombs in Afghanistan. Their community needed more of God, so did the murderers who planted those bloody bombs.

The thousands upon thousands of mostly elderly people in India who wanted to take one more breath but who could not because a virus prevented them, who could not because a lack of available vaccines not distributed to their country prevented them. They needed more of God, more love, more oxygen, more compassion.

This week the mammal who was put down to prevent her from suffering any more in the Thames. The youthful ocean giant who fled or got lost amidst an increasing toxic ocean, that young whale needed more love, needed more of God just to stay alive. As do all ecosystems – all creatures – all things that have breath; they all praise God, they all receive the love of God and they need more as do you and I.

Now just imagine if ours were a god of vengeance, or a god of chaos or destruction. Imagine if ours were od filled with petty insecurity, needing to be appeased like a toddler throwing a tantrum, because those were common traits of the gods of the ancient near east and Mediterranean. Desperate to be appeased or else. The Greek gods acted like characters in a poorly written incestuous television soapy forever taking their insecurities and frustrations out on us mortals.

Our world did and does not need more of such gods, as we as people can be petty and insecure and bent on vengeance. We do not need a god to inspire us to more of such destructive behaviour.

In the ancient near east, the lot of each of the nations indicated just how powerful, how boastfully virile and murderous the chief god or gods were of whichever nation was victorious. Just like the Chaldeans, the Assyrians and the Babylonians.

Just think back to the arrogance of the Nazi Aryanism 80 years ago claiming its rise and initial invasion victories in Poland, France, and Belgium as proof of how effective and powerful the Aryan race was. Of how powerful the philosophy and worldview of Aryanism was. But we know that it was obviously a deadly, rubbish ideology that a nation bowed to and adhered to, enough to hijack a whole nation's

understanding of themselves and the world around them, enough to have them murder and maim, commit genocide and invade country after country.

So amidst the violence and plunder caused by the Babylonians and Assyrians some two and a half millennia ago into the exile that the two kingdoms of Israel and Judea were forced into – into those destabilising, destructive events and environment steps the prophet Isaiah, proclaiming a different God. A different reality. A completely contrary, different worldview. One that seems fanciful, fantastic in the original sense of the word, incredible, impossible.

Imagine having lived through the death and destruction of your family, of your livelihood, the murder of your neighbours, the humiliation of the women in your community, seeing your sons and daughters being dragged away by the violent neighbouring nations.

What would be foremost in your heart?

Vengeance, hatred, revenge, restoring your own honour. An eye for an eye. And yet, the God that Isaiah says he speaks on behalf of, Jahwe, says that He will restore peace and harmony. A peace and harmony that surpasses our wildest dreams.

Gone will be the nightmare of war and destruction, to be replaced by the fairy-tale like dream of enemies being reconciled and peace reigning amongst former natural foes. The wolf will live with the lamb, the leopard will lie down with the goat, the calf and the lion will graze together; and a little child will lead them. The cow will feed with the bear, their young will lie down together, and the lion will eat straw like the ox. The infant will play near the cobra's den, and the young child will put its hand into the viper's nest.

In wonderful symbolic language the prophet says that God is a God of love and harmony, not inclined to death and destruction. And because it is at the heart of God's desire for creation, for humanity, God constantly works towards THAT end.

Even to the point of getting personally involved to make it a reality, by sending a mediator, someone who will broker such incredible, such supernatural harmony and reconciliation.

Now you might think, "Aye right, enemies do not become friends, just ask the Israelis and the Palestinians."

I could.

And indeed, sometimes the impossible seems impossible, but as one of the recent peacemakers, Nelson Mandela, said: "It is only impossible until somebody does it, then it has become possible."

Ask the Protestants and the Catholics in Ireland today. Peace is possible. Difficult, costly, requiring reconciliation and forgiveness, and humanity and compassion, but it IS possible. Ask the French and the Germans and the English who had for centuries been at one another's throats, and yet, today as for the last three generations we have had peace. Ask the Rwandese Hutus and Tutsis, ask the Indians and Pakistanis, ask the White and the Black communities of former apartheid South Africa, or the Japanese and the Chinese.

All of these nations and people groups had at a stage in the not too distant past been at war with one another. They are no longer.

Yes the peace might be fragile and tenuous, but peace generally is.

So as you and I think about the apparent increase in tensions around the globe, on the Russian Ukrainian

border, on the Ethiopian Eritrean border, in the China sea, in the Baltic, around the Republic of Ireland, in Afghanistan, Persia, Myanmar and in the Israeli occupied areas of Palestine, as you think of these areas where chaos and destruction, death and fear is looking to erupt, let us call on the Prince of Peace, to turn our nightmare world into God's dream for our world.

Let us pray for peacemakers to find their voice, the children of God to stand and be present. For the children of God's feeble hands to be strengthened to tear down walls. For the shaking knees of the peacemakers, God's children, to be steadied enough to stand up to proclaim forgiveness and peace.

In this week where we celebrated the ascension of Jesus the Christ to the very throne of God let us call on the Sovereign Lord to make a reality, his peace that transcends our barriers and our understanding. The peace that is born from God.

Because God IS LOVE.

Amen

I got good news & I got bad news.

It's the same news.

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 11:1-9



What's your thing? The thing that really excites and energises you? What get's you emotionally and practically involved?

Being a parish minister I have the privilege of hearing people reminisce, share about their loved ones who have recently passed away. When I meet with family or friends to comfort, or to just be present with them when they lost someone dear to them, they often tell me stories and quips, characteristics and passions of their beloved.

I wonder sometimes what people will say about me, when the piper plays for me. Do you ever wonder how people will describe you? Will they know what you are passionate about? How would the people who know you best describe your essence? Your core values, your soul?

When listening to the prophet Isaiah, we get a sense of someone describing the essence of God, someone who knows God very well, who then shares the heart and soul of the Almighty, who tells us about the Spirit of God.

There are about 20 or so verses that specifically mentions the Spirit of God spread all over the Book of Isaiah. Verses where the prophet shares the heart of God, shares what the very Spirit of God does and yearns for.

As today is Pentecost Sunday and as we have entered the season of Pentecost, which is traditionally the time of year that churches focus specifically on the Holy Spirit, the Spirit of God, it is a good opportunity for us to look at what the Book of Isaiah tells us about the Spirit of God.

Traditionally when Christians talk about the Holy Spirit, or the Spirit of God, images that are used to describe the person, or the work of the Spirit of God are symbols like wind, or breath, fire, a dove or water. Each of these has some meaning connected to it, like peace or life, or energetic dynamism or change.

But when we listen to what is said about God's Spirit in the Book of Isaiah, there is less use of symbolism, but more of a focus on what the Spirit of God does. In other words, what does God's Spirit aim to achieve. What is God's Spirit about, what is the Spirit doing?

We heard 12 verses read to us that are representative of what is found in the Book of Isaiah about the Spirit of God.

In essence God's Spirit enables life.

God's Spirit makes life possible for God's people.

What is God all about? God's Spirit is life giving, life affirming.

How we see this playing out, is two-fold.

Where life has been damaged, broken, trampled, abused, neglected – there the Spirit of God intervenes and revives and restores, heals and regenerates. That's the good news.

The bad news is, if anyone damages life, breaks or destroys life, abuses or neglects the lives of others – there the Spirit of God will intervene and bring judgement and restore justice, punishment and discipline, even destruction. That's the bad news.

Good news and bad news.

The first 4 verses about the Spirit of God in Isaiah told us the Good news – the Spirit of God restores, quickens, revives, enlivens, heals, regenerates, brings hope, liberates, gives sight and a new future... to those who need it, to those who turn to God for justice, for help.

But, the second set of 4 verses about the Spirit of God in Isaiah told us the bad - the Spirit of God opposes, humiliates, disciplines, defeats, destroys and becomes a nightmare... to those who deserve it, to those who oppose God through injustice and arrogance.

You do realise, though, that it is the same news?

It is basically one main theme, one value, one essence of God – God loves life. God makes life possible. God gives and protects life. Particularly for those who have a covenant with God, particularly for those who shelter with God. It is just one essential principle. God gives and maintains life.

If yours is being destroyed – turn to God who will protect, heal, save, restore your life – that's God's promise. That's what the Spirit of God does.

But if you are the one who destroys the life of others – then God will turn against you, will limit and embarrass and cut you down to size... just so as to enable the flow and continuation of life again that God had in mind for your victims. That's what the Spirit of God does.

So it is the same essential power, drive, force, intention that the Spirit of God has – enabling true life. If you have it – praise God. If you want it – turn to God. If you are limiting it for others – then know that God will stop you.

It is an important principle that Liberation Theology has highlighted over the last few decades. The Gospel is Good News, to the oppressed, but bad news to the oppressor. The Gospel of liberation from bondage, from sin, from death is good news to those whose lives are endangered, who are wanting to break from the power or consequences of sin, whether individual or systemic or structural. But if you help to oppress others, emotionally, politically, structurally, culturally, then you are the one that the oppressed need to be liberated from. That is bad news to the oppressor, then.

So what is God about, what is the Spirit of God essentially about?

Giving and enabling and protecting – LIFE. And when it is off balance, the Spirit of God restores it by giving it or preventing it from being taken.

Which brings us to the 3rd and last set of 4 verse we heard today about the Spirit of God in Isaiah. These are verses that illustrate the effect that the Spirit of God has – on the Promised One, the Messiah, the Servant King. That figure that the prophet prophesied about that was yet to come and which the New Testament writers said found its complete fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

When one reads those verses we see that the effect of the Spirit of God, according to the prophet Isaiah is exactly that – the Spirit of God enables, teaches, empowers the Promised One, the eventual Messiah to proclaim the restoration of life. As Christians we believe that Jesus from Nazareth, Jesus Christ, is the one who proclaimed that news, and who made it possible – proclaiming the restoration of God's will for creation and humanity and society.

Towards the end of Isaiah, in what is known as the third book of Isaiah, or the third part, we see the Spirit empowering the Messiah to go forth, beyond just the nation of Juda, or the nation of Israel but to share this desire, this power of God to restore life in its fulness to ALL NATIONS.

And that is what Jesus then tells his followers, to go and proclaim that news to all nations. And when the Holy Spirit comes over each of the disciples gathered they are empowered to go and share that great news of life and restoration with all people, even being able to miraculously communicate with all. That is how important it was and still is for the news of God being the giver and protector of life for ALL peoples. No wonder that the very people in the synagogue, the very Jews that Jesus read that Scripture of Isaiah to, that the Spirit of God is on him to proclaim justice and freedom and healing to all who are downtrodden and marginalised, not only to their own nation, as we read in Luke chapter 4 no wonder they tried to kill him by attempting to throw him off a cliff.

So what does that mean for us, today, in 2021?

It means that as followers of Jesus, as worshippers of the same God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob – we should be living lives that are life affirming, lives that affirm the rights and dignity of all peoples, especially

of the oppressed, even to the point of standing up for what is right, that's what the Spirit of God would want us to do, that is what Jesus taught us and exemplified for us to do.

For God desires that life should be valued and held as sacred. Lives lived in freedom and not in oppression. So, if the Uighurs people are oppressed by the Chinese government apparatus, we should pray against it, we should write to our MPs, we should not turn and look the other way because the oppressed are Muslims and the oppressors are a superpower.

For God desires that life should be valued and held as sacred. Lives lived in freedom and not in oppression. So if the lives of sea creatures, big and small, are threatened by the vast amounts of chemicals and plastics that we as humans produce that end up in our oceans, then we should find ways to protect lives that are fragile and stop oppressing that part of creation. Even and especially as we change our ways of consumption and purchasing and manufacturing.

For God desires that life should be valued and held as sacred. Lives lived in freedom and not in oppression. So on a personal level – if you need the wisdom to discern in your own life, or in the life of your community, how life can be more in tune with what the Spirit of God desires, ask the Spirit of God to instruct you. To open your eyes and your heart to where and how life can be valued more and deeper, where dignity can be restored and society celebrated.

For God desires that life should be valued and held as sacred. Lives lived in freedom and not in oppression. And finally, as we slowly start to exit from our year-long isolation and virtual solitude because of the pandemic, may we open our hearts and eventually our homes and church halls to celebrate life in all its colour and candour. Let us be hospitable, appreciating people again for who they are and enjoying ourselves in the process.

For the essence of God is to grant and to value life for all it's worth.

Amen.

Those were the days, my friend

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 41



Can you remember when the congregation booked seven double decker buses to transport the masses of our church children to the annual Church Sunday School Picnic? The games, the fun, the energy and all the glorious food and snacks. And the youth services when the Craigsbank sanctuary was creaking at the seams, extra chairs had to be brought in to accommodate all the worshipers. Or how quickly we used to fill the cradle rolls on the wall in the hallway behind the pulpit as bairn after bairn was baptised? Of those were glorious days when you would often see three generations next to one another in a pew, grandparents, parents and the children. How beautiful those 1950s and 1960s were.

If only we could have those days back.

But, they are gone.

Scotland is no longer a country where Christian worship is an essential part of society. Neither is England, Wales, Ireland or for that matter France, Belgium, Denmark or Germany. Gone are the days when there were multiple Christian congregations in most villages. Gone are the days when the National Church spoke and the government listened.

But this is not new, this has been a continuing trend for many generations now all across the UK. And not only in the UK, but across all countries where English is the first language of native born citizens.

Once a Christian empire that went out in the name of our God, our King and our Country. And then the empire came to an end, colonialism dies, and Christendom within the empire starts to die off.

So when the Church of Scotland this week at our General Assembly announces that it will be reducing ministry posts and merging congregations over the next few years by about 25%, observers are not surprised. Such contraction is nothing new in the English west, it seems to merely be picking up speed.

A related issue, often unspoken but simmering just below the service, is the question of what does this say about the God of the Christians? If Christendom is collapsing, does that mean the God of the Christians has also collapsed? Contracted. Died off?

Has he? For the Christendom god is very much a he. Is he dead and gone? Has he left the building and turned his back on the church?

Well, funny you should ask. I reckon that was some of the sentiment that the very first followers of Jesus must have had when Jesus breathed his last on the cross and they saw his mutilated, lifeless body wrapped and buried in the tomb? So that's that then? Isn't it?

But they were not the first to ask that demoralising question. For some 5 centuries earlier many of their ancestors had asked the same question that we might be asking today in the church in the UK and in the EU, the same question that the disciples asked on that Passover Saturday in Jerusalem. For Israel was once an empire of sorts, a nation with prestige and military might and wealth and an enviable civil service and a self-assurance they had never had before. They did not have to make Israel great again, because under Solomon Israel was already great. But a few centuries into the Davidic dynasty the empire of Israel was shattered, their unity destroyed, their rulers killed and enslaved, their military and their homes and harvests destroyed, children carted away as slaves, and their religion and worship spaces desecrated and humiliated, along with their God Jahwe.

They were the laughing stock of the ancient near east. The Assyrians had destroyed the larger part of the Kingdom (Israel) and the Babylonians destroyed the remaining smaller part (Judah).

And in the worldview, the popular perception of that era, the lot, the status of a nation reflected on the status, the power of the god of that particular nation. If your country was victorious then your gods were seen to be mighty, if you lost the war, then shame, clearly your god was not strong enough to protect you or to help you to be victorious.

So what we find here in Isaiah 41 is a defeated Israel and Judah. They have been defeated, the remnant had either fled or was dragged away in exile. So in this scene described here in Isaiah, we find the God of Israel and Judah being accused of being weak, pathetic, unable to protect Israel. God in the dock. Israel and Judah's god, Jahwe, accused of being weak and insignificant and either unable or unwilling to protect his people.

Now how do you think Jahwe responds to these accusations?

How would you respond to accusations levelled at you for being weak, or not willing or able to protect your children?

Please allow me to give you a brief overview of how this short courtroom drama plays out that the prophet Isaiah describes in much more detailed, vivid language. I will just give you the shorter journalist version:

This court session is officially called in session with the defendant: Jahwe, the God of Israel and the accusers being the nations, effectively what we might call nowadays "them" or "they". As in, they say this or that, the faceless masses that are alleged to make accusations. The accusation is that Jahwe is weak, too weak to protect the nation that he is the god of.

And then we have Jahwe stating his defence, and it is done through 6 lines of defence.

First line of defence: The current hegemon is actually a product of Jahwe. So all the powerful victories of the most powerful nation is due to Jahwe. Actually, all the generations of powerful Jahwe has produced

Second line of defence: The accusers actually fear this power and try to motivate one another. By building trues idols, ironically the way weapons are made so their accusations are invalid.

Third line of defence: Jahwe not only acts as god of Israel, but he actually made Israel, chose Israel – not the other way around. So Israel can relax in the knowledge that Jahwe does care for and protect his chosen one.

Fourth line of defence: Detail of just how great Jahwe's protection is of his people and how their

enemies will fail.

Fifth line of defence: Jahwe will help Israel by making her/him an instrument that will lead to the destruction of their enemies.

Sixth line of defence: Jahwe will care for those most in need through extraordinary provision, symbolically and practically, to the point of also blessing nature in the process. Jahwe will do it in such a way that it will be clear that it is the God of Israel who has done all this mighty acts.

So now that Jahwe's status has been proven, he calls his opposition to state their case. As Jahwe now turns the table on them, by stating that they actually worship ineffective, weak, useless nonentity fake gods, idols.

Jahwe's first challenge to them and their idols: Can you know or predict the future in line with the past? No, you cannot.

Jahwe's second challenge: Actually, just do anything (good or bad) to get us to take notice or respect you.

Jahwe's three main accusations of them are repeated: Gods/idols of the nations are nothing, as are your works and your followers are detestable.

Jahwe's three main points of defence of himself is repeated: Raising the hegemon. Predicting his rise. And in so doing prepared Israel to protect them.

Jahwe's challenge concludes: no other god can provide guidance, nor even an answer.

Conclusion: The other gods are false, their deeds nothing and their images empty and confusing.

So, so how does all of this relate to our post-Christendom age of diminished status of our religion, and of "our" God?

The most obvious is our state as "people of God", like Israel of old, the church in the west today are not in a position of prestige and political power, but rather needing to serve from the margins.

The more important lesson, I believe, for us today is to realise that God is not our God, we are at best God's people, God does not belong to us, we belong to God. God did not belong to Juda or Israel – no, they belonged to him. This means that they needed to be the way God desired them to be, not the other way around. He was never supposed to be at their beck and call. His existence was not dependent on them, rather theirs was merely and purely because of God's grace and will.

So as a church, we need not be concerned about secularism or atheism – but rather we should be concerned about whether we are living and exemplifying the care and integrity, the love of justice and of humility that befits the servant, the child, the friend of Jahwe.

If we are the new Israel – let us not be as arrogant to think we own God, God owns us, we are called into being to glorify God, how? By proving how life affirming, loving, just, reconciliatory, forgiving God is, particularly caring for the helpless – in stead of trying to lord it over others, rather serving others – as God told Israel they should, as Jahwe said Jesus would, as Jesus did, as Jesus told the church to do, as the first Christians told the subsequent generations of Christians to do.

Finally, some of the things that the Jews and Israelites feared and thought were proof of Jahwe's

weakness, his inability to influence history, were actually come about precisely because they were caused or used by Jahwe in his great providence. Such as the rise of Cyrus who was used by Jahwe to effect God's will in the grand scheme of things, including restoring a purified remnant of Israel and the Jews back to Jerusalem. Se we will do well to note that some of the things that we think are for worse is actually movements, effects of God's providential grace – end of slavery, end of forced proselytization, end of patriarchy, end of homophobia, end of colonialism, end of capitalism, end of Christendom, end of the kirk as religious institution.

Let us then hear the promises of God to us, as Jahwe promised to Israel – that his will will prevail and our part in it is to follow the servant heart of God in caring and sharing, proclaiming and acknowledging God, regardless of our circumstances or our fears.

We can stop playing the futile game of trying to be great again – it is about being true, true to the character of God's spirit. Life affirming, inclusive, loving, caring.

Living as children of God, as followers of Jesus empowered by the very Spirit of God, not by might, nor by power – but by my Spirit, says the Lord.

Amen

The Servant King

Rev Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 53



Customisation.

Customisation, or to customise, is to make or change something to suit the needs of the owner or the user.

Like when you decide to buy a new car and the supplier gives you all these options: what colour you want the vehicle in, size of engine, leather or cloth seat covers, with the satellite navigation built in or not. Which is quite the opposite to those first mass-produced Model-T Fords of which Henry Ford allegedly said, “You can have it in any colour, as long as it’s black.”

It’s the whole principle behind the children’s toy store franchise of “Build-a-bear”. Customers can choose from a variety of stuffed animals, which is then made and tailored to their own preferences whilst they are at the store. These preferences include a variety of scents, sounds, outfits and accessories.

Obviously, one would then pay for the privilege of getting things your own way, often the greater the customisation the greater the cost.

So if you were to design or to customise your own god, your own deity that would be according to your requirements, what would that god look like, or more specifically, what would that god be like?

After all, it is something that religions are often accused of, that they, or we, project our own desires or fears onto our god or gods and then it makes it easier for us to worship such a man-made god.

Which, by the way, is one of the first commandments that Jahwe gives the nation of Israel – do not worship other gods, particularly not manmade gods, idols.

But what I am asking you, is not to make a god and then to worship such a god, my questions is rather – if you were to make, to design your own god, what would the characteristics be?

Surely the deity would be strong, clever, omnipotent, trustworthy, hopefully kind, even loving, but definitely impressive enough to warrant respect. Presumably we would opt for a god that is immortal and ageless, definitely untouched by the deceit and deviousness of humankind.

Now some of those characteristics are assigned to some of the gods of different religions, modern day ones but also many ancient ones. Even the church through the ages used to ascribe many, if not all of those characteristics to the Christian God, the God of Abraham, Isaac and Jacob.

Actually, many of the gods of the ancient near-East and Mediterranean were much more conniving, murderous, vengeful, and sex-starved than we care to remember. In an era where brute strength, military

Initially this special one will be rather inconspicuous, unassuming. Easy to overlook.

What does make this agent of Jahwe so special, is not his grand entrance onto the scene, but rather, according to Isaiah, what he does on behalf of God, on behalf of Jahwe.

Does this agent of God come to meet out vengeance on the enemies of the Jews? No. Despite many Jews having hoped so. This is not a political liberator in the nationalist sense. He does not bring the sword to meet out vengeance.

Does this agent come to punish the Jews for all the divine laws they had broken, the damage they had actually caused to their relationship with God and to their calling in the world as people supposed to model what a society looked like that was based on God's principles of care, justice and respect for life? No, this emissary of Jahwe does not come to discipline. He does not bring a whip to meet out punishment.

Does this ambassador of God come to rule and reign over the Jews like a king? After all, the Jews do not have a proper functioning king at this stage, and they could do with some esteem and prestige, a sense of royal ceremony and bravado. But no, quite the contrary, this servant of God comes not to reign with a sceptre, but to serve with a basin and a towel, not only God, but also the Jews, and in effect all of humanity.

Restoring the relationship between God and humanity is the main focus of this promised intermediary, not through killing God's enemies, but by being killed because of the wrong caused by all humanity.

Restoring the relationship between God and humanity not through disciplining God's people, but by being beaten, humiliated and wrongly accused by the very people of God.

Restoring the relationship between humanity and God not through claiming to be a king and issuing dictates, but by becoming the servant of all and exemplifying God's desire to love all of humanity, you and me included – even to the point of laying down his life for us all.

So as you are viewing this service, I assume you are part of a church somewhere, probably Craigsbank itself, possibly at another congregation, possibly nowhere, but you might have some kind of an affiliation to a church somewhere.

I have been wondering this week past, as the news broke from Canada about the residential schools that the government ran mostly through the Catholic church, where it now appears there had been systemic racist deprivation of the children to the point of causing much family breakdown and the death of many, many children. The catholic church, not preventing the death of many innocent children in their care.

And in this same week there was the centennial commemoration of the racist genocide of African-American families in Tulsa in America, that followed a few months after an alleged hugely influential protestant evangelical revival that led to thousands of people claiming a conversion of sorts. The evangelical hellfire and brimstone revival campaign, not preventing the murder of many innocent black neighbours in their midst.

And in this same week BBC world radio reported on the systemic, intended genocide of the aboriginal people of Australia from the 1700s through the 1800s killing many thousands of first nations people. Admittedly not under the auspices of a church, but nonetheless in the name of the British empire and it's

prowess and the reign of terror were at the order of the day, the gods of the victorious nations were often the epitome of such fearsome destruction and enforced loyalties.

When the prophet Isaiah then shares a vision of the God of Israel and Juda saving the defeated, humiliated wee remnant of Juda, the returning exiles settling back into what was left of their once noteworthy kingdom, you would think that this God Jahwe, the God of their forefathers, the creator of heaven and earth according to their scribes, this God would now rise up in awesome power and defeat the foes – even if it is in the far distant future. Because that is what a real god would do, stand up to restore his name, to make Israel great again, to make the name of Jahwe feared and respected again?

Except, that is not what the prophet shares, that is not what Isaiah says God has in mind, because that not who God is.

No wonder the vision starts with an almost exasperated statement: “Who believes what we’ve heard and seen? Who would have thought God’s saving power would look like this?”

When Jahwe share his plans, his own vision for the future it is literally unbelievable. Not because it is larger than life, not because it is soooo far removed from the broken reality of the remaining Jews, but precisely because it is absolutely strange, absolutely not what is expected of a proper god, and it makes no sense whatsoever.

Firstly, God says the main issue is not whether you are great or not, whether I am perceived to be great or not. It really is not about greatness, or might, or revenge.

It is first and foremost about my relationship with my people. Once the bad blood, the sins and failures that have caused a break in our relationship have been taken care of, then we can look towards this improved future you are hoping for. It reminds me of one of Jesus’ familiar saying centuries later: Seek first the kingdom of God and then all these other things will be taken care of.

So, yes the people are hurting and yes Jahwe’s honour has been damaged because his people are overrun by nations worshipping other gods, but Jahwe says – focus, remember we are in a covenant relationship, that’s the start, the rest is detail.

Now may I ask you, as you are participating in this service. Where do your priorities lie? What is the state of your covenant relationship with God? Are you still on speaking terms, or have you misplaced his number, so to speak?

Your relationship with your maker, your saviour, your spiritual parent, is of utmost importance – seek ye first the Kingdom of God and all the other things will be taken care of.

Back to the prophet’s message, his astoundingly unexpected message.

The prophet says that God has decided to restore this relationship between humanity, beginning with God’s covenant people, but in due course with all people – and how will God accomplish this relationship restoration? Not by a divine law or religious rituals or through a class of priests or sacrifices that the people must make to prove their loyalty to God. That would have been par for the course, that would have been the way people normally appease gods, or bribe them.

No, what Jahwe, God says, is that he will raise up a special mediator, a fixer, an intermediary that will be utterly unique. Not to begin with, but eventually the outcome will prove that intermediaries uniqueness.

diabolical slogan “For God, King and Country”. How did the Anglican church not stop such heinous atrocities, and actually enabled the state apparatus to harm what became known of the stolen generations?

And obviously, as South African born, Dutch Reformed ordained church minister, I have often had to struggle with the question of why the reformed churches in South Africa generally gave its blessings to the evil worldview of white supremacy that undergirded the evil of apartheid?



So earlier this week I posted the following tweet on my Twitter account that referred to exactly these atrocities – that the church in the respective countries were often aware of, but either unwilling or ineffective to stop. And I concluded by saying that these were clearly pure evil.

You might be wondering – woah Alan, why do you bring these contentious high profile news items up if we are thinking about a prophetic vision of 2500 years ago?

Easy, the vision says God loves us, all, and God loves by reconciling and forgiving and building bridges and taking the pain into himself. Or in the words of John 3:16 – God so loved us that he basically died for us, God would rather rip God’s own heart out that hurt you, me or anyone else. So how can the church, the people of God as we as Christians like to view ourselves, how can the church act in any other way, and call ourselves children or followers of Jesus Christ?

We should not be causing pain, resentment and hatred, especially not towards God. Neither should we allow fellow Christians to do such a thing. If we then wonder why so many people have turned away from churches and church memberships, then here is a huge part of the reason. The church in so many places across the world and through so many generations has turned a blind eye, or sometimes have even been participants in societal evil.

So then if we, you and I, can do anything to restore people’s view of God as trustworthy, loving, caring, reconciling, just, inclusive, compassionate – then you and I will have to embody those characteristics, both in our personal lives but also collectively as a faith community, as a congregation, wherever your congregation is.

Because deeds do speak much louder than words.

When people see you – do they see someone who wants to be a judge, a king, a disciplinarian – to make the church great again?

Or do they see someone who is keen to help and serve and build relationship that can lead to community through a caring congregation?

The two really are mutually exclusive.

Only one of those depicts the true character of God.

Amen

The emperor's new clothes

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 59



Do you think it's fair that older people received the Covid-vaccine first, before younger people? Let's say – the elderly in a local care home, before the students in residence accommodation of a local university. I reckon you might say, yes, the elderly should.

Why do you think so?

I would assume your answer will have something to do with vulnerability, that is, the vulnerability of people above especially 70 years of age to the negative impacts of the Covid virus.

And do you think it is equitable, it is right, that people in wealthier countries receive their viruses before people in poor countries? Let's say that the British get their vaccine before the Somalians. If you say, yes, it is probably because you might be thinking – well, the Brits can pay for it but the Somalians cannot, or something like charity begins at home.

Now what if I asked you – should a 75 year old Somali in Africa get the vaccine first or an 18 year old Scot in Edinburgh?

If we were to be consistent with the first argument of vulnerability, then surely the elderly all over the world should have been vaccinated before moving lower down the age range in wealthier countries.

What I am sure none of us would agree with, is the shocking actions of various G7 countries who bought up many times the number of vaccines required to give their citizens two doses each, before allowing other, poorer countries to buy the little remaining vaccines.

Surely that is not fair, nor is it just.

And that is what much of today's chapter in Isaiah is about – it is about justice and fairness, about mercy and truth. The Hebrew Scriptures, the old testament, has two words that are closely related and which are often used in close proximity of one another, but they do not mean exactly the same: mishpat and tsedeq. Justice and righteousness. Reg en geregtigheid.

Both these terms feature heavily in our Isaiah 59 of today.

Justice – which in essence is about doing what is the right thing to do and Righteousness – which is a relational term, it means to be in the right relationship, or for the relationship to be right between two parties. Tsedeq, righteousness, be in good standing, in a good relationship with another entity. Mishpat – justice, which is both to ensure that the right things are done but also that the wrong things are not perpetrated.

The chapter opens with the interesting double statement: Whoa, just a moment – God is neither unable

The prophet implies: So, House of Judah, you want to challenge Jahwe? You feel you are able to challenge God. So let's hear, what do you, dear House of Judah, have in your moral wardrobe, so to speak, that you are dressing yourselves in, is it beautiful dresses of good deeds, lovely shawls of compassion, accessories of knowledge and shoes of wisdom?

Nope, no, I am afraid not. You are dressed in "useless cobwebs for clothing, evil deeds that leave you naked – you are unable to even cover yourself with anything worthwhile,". The people of God are morally naked with only cobwebs full of evil deeds, like spiders on a cobweb".

Urgh.

Even worse than a naked, vain emperor without clothes.

And Jahwe, what does the clothing collection of the House of Jahwe look like this year?

Wow, wow!

Jahwe is wearing "the work of Salvation,
made from his own Righteousness.

He is dressed in Righteousness,
put on like a three piece suit,
with Salvation on his head like a stylish hat".

Looking all dressed up to the nines,
Jahwe "puts on Judgement like an overcoat"

And to top it all off, He winds a colourful scarf of Passion around his neck, draping over his chest.

What a stark contrast.

So, dear sisters and brothers, what can we take from this ancient work of moral, religious literature for our day and age?

It's obviously not really about clothes and fashion. That's merely a metaphor for one's state of being just and righteous, in other words – do you act fairly, with integrity, compassionately, in justice, helping those in need and opposing those that abuse their power – or are you self-centred, vainly focused on your own esteem and comfort. The former is the way of God, the latter is a way leading to destruction – probably your own in the long run.

If that was all there is to this chapter in Isaiah, it would be a nice morality lesson saying – "now children, play nice".

But that is not what this chapter, nor the message of Isaiah is about. As important as it is to be respectful and compassionate, Isaiah – although speaking to the House of Juda, also addresses humanity in general, - when he says that we should be more just, more moral, more compassionate – but we keep on falling short of the mark, we simply never consistently live up to our moral, spiritual, ethical potential – oftentimes quite the contrary.

We are indeed like the vain emperor without clothes on, morally, we are very, very underdressed for what it takes to be humane, just, fair, compassionate people. And that is a critical point that the prophet

to help you, nor is God uninformed about your need for help. He knows what to do, and He is able to do it.

The prophet defends God from the accusations of his people who blames God for the plight that they are in. Which is a rather terrible state of affairs.

If you have been following our series about the Book of Isaiah, you will have heard me say that at this point in the life of the nation of Israel, they had been defeated numerous times by their stronger neighbours, been broken up, taken into exile, and a remnant had returned to rebuild what little was left of their former glory.

So they turn on their God, Jahwe, and blame him for being unfair towards them. They basically say – Excuse us, with all due respect, but are you deaf or something? Why do you allow us to mire in such a poor state? Or maybe you do know, but you are too weak or disinterested to help us? You are not a just god, you do not treat us fairly, you do not treat us equitably.

So what does Jahwe do? Does He smite them with hellfire and brimstone? Does He ignore them?

No, He honours the fact that they engage him, even if it is actually to complain to him, or about him. After all, Jahwe had promised never to forsake his people, so like a faithful partner, Jahwe attends to his covenant partner's concerns and replies.

And this is where it gets really interesting.

A fascinating bit of Hebrew poetry plays out here.

The prophet says on behalf of God – So you talk about being treated unfairly, a lack of justice from God's side. But let's look at what your lives look like and then he mentions a whole wrap sheet of crimes, a litany of wrongdoings that the Jews are responsible for: abuse of power, neglect of the vulnerable, deceit, corruption, violence and lies.

Using very descriptive metaphors, for example – the people blaming God as if they have perfect vision are actually like blind people at night who walk straight into walls. Worse still, they are like zombies who merely keep on shuffling along. So who are they to accuse God?

Anyway, the people blame Jahwe for being unfair, but He then says – I look and seek for a sign of fairness and justice and righteousness amongst you, my people, and yet I cannot find a single sign of it. You my people should by now know what is the right and just thing to do, your poor state of affairs is not because I did not "help" you or treated you "unfairly" – it is merely the consequence of your own injustice towards one another, the consequence of your own choices and actions. Another metaphor is used to illustrate this principle of reaping the results of your own actions: like spiders and snakes you lay eggs that then hatch. When these dangerous snakes and spiders bite you – your pain is merely the outcome of the self-centred, abusive choices and actions you took.

Now before I get to God's decision on how best to proceed to get out of this woeful state of affairs – I need to tell you about the most striking contrast in this Hebrew poem first, the one about the fashion stand-off, the clash of wardrobes between Jahwe and the Jews.

If you have had the opportunity to see the delicious dual between Cruella Devil and The Baroness (played by Dame Emma Thompson) at the cinema recently, you will have an appreciation for how striking an affair a battle of wardrobes can be amongst the fashion conscious.

Isaiah makes in our text today. When next you and I think of ourselves as righteous and just – just look in the mirror first, and we will be surprised.

And that is what makes Jahwe so very unique, so worthwhile taking seriously, so worthwhile worshipping – for Jahwe loves his people so much, he loves us, the world so much, that he says: I will sort it out. I will save you. I will clothe you. I will ensure that justice takes place, that those who abuse their power will be checked, that the vulnerable will be cared for and that life can be celebrated again.

That is what this fashion review of Jahwe’s outfit is about: listen how Jahwe takes all those responsibilities and outcomes onto himself as he rights the wrongs, saves the lost, restores broken relationships with him.

He couldn’t believe what he saw – no one clothed in righteousness or salvation or compassion:
not a soul around to correct this awful situation.

So he did it himself, he saved the lost,
He dressed in Righteousness, put it on like a suit of armour,
with Salvation on his head like a helmet,
Put on Judgment like an overcoat,
and threw a cloak of Passion across his shoulders.

It boils down to verse 20 where God officially decrees: “I’ll arrive in Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who leave their sins.”

And the rest is history. The history of Jesus of Bethlehem – he who inaugurates the beginning of this long awaited reign of God where the last will be first, the sorrowful are comforted, the hungry fed and the lost saved.

Or in the words of Jesus’ friend, John, “God so loved the world that he gave his one and only child so that we can be saved”.

Or in the words of the apostle Paul – we all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God, we are naked emperors, at best dressed in cobwebs, but praise God who then does the saving, the dressing us for the occasion of being truly human. God dresses us in the finest robes (the image the Book of Revelations uses) or in the language of the story of the prodigal son who returns home to his father’s house to ask forgiveness – the father envelopes him, wraps his own robe around his dishevelled prodigal child, clothing him in honour again.

So not only is God just and compassionate, God through Jesus transfers his justness and his compassion onto us if we truly turn to him – in the words of Isaiah – if we turn away from our sins, or in the words of John’s gospel – if we believe in Jesus for salvation – or in the words of Jesus’ parable – if we turn to our father and ask his forgiveness for our failures. Yes we are morally underdressed at best, but in Jesus we are dressed in the most immaculate moral and spiritual garments imaginable.

That is good news, gospel news. Amen

I want to break free

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 61:1-3 and 8-11



So this week two giants met at a special venue, two old rivals, and the world took notice.

No, I am not referring to the Scotland versus England football match played at Wembley on Friday.

I am rather referring to the heads of state of Russia and the United States of America who met at a beautiful lakeside mansion in Geneva, Switzerland.

It was a rather important moment in international diplomacy with tensions having increased between these two blocks of late.

But what caught my ear and my eye was what was said after the meeting of Mr Putin and Mr Biden, when the former KGB officer and increasingly dictatorial President Putin stated with a somewhat wry smile his impression of what can be hoped for having met President Biden in person.

Vladimir Putin said: "There is no happiness in life. There's only a mirage on the horizon, so you know, you should cherish that."

Just let that comment by one of the world's most influential political leaders, the leader of the former heartland of the Soviet Union sink in: "There is no happiness in life. There's only a mirage on the horizon."

Some might call him a pessimist. Some would call him merely a realist. He definitely is true to his roots as atheist. For if there is no God, especially not a loving God, then there can be neither happiness nor meaning to the struggles we face in this life.

Apparently President Putin was quoting a comment that was once ascribed to the great Russian author of Victorian times, Leo Tolstoy. The author of such influential works as War and Peace and Anna Karenina. But if you have ever read Tolstoy, you will know that he was a devout Christian who fervently lived out his love to his neighbour in service, because he loved God and he knew God loved him. And that made all the difference to him. Knowing that he is loved and that he can love in return.

Tolstoy did acknowledge that happiness is indeed sometimes fleeting, but he was adamant that it did indeed exist, and it was best experienced in a relationship with God that was manifested in living compassionately and simply. Leo Tolstoy wrote some very insightful spiritual memoirs and his life testified of his love of God, a life lived in simplicity and in service to people in real need.

So I find it ironic that a morally and ideologically self-centred Vladimir Vladimirovich Putin should selectively quote from the wisdom of the quite selfless Lev Nikolayevich Tolstoy, who was nominated for the Nobel Prize in Literature 5 times and 3 times for the Nobel Peace Prize. What they would agree on is the fleeting nature of happiness, but to Vladimir Putin it does not exist, to Leo Tolstoy it does very much

exist and starts with loving God and culminates in loving your neighbour. Two things that Mr Putin is not known for, so it follows that happiness would elude him – ironically despite his wealth and his power.

Why do I highlight Mr Putin's pessimistic, fatalistic outlook on life if we are considering the Prophet Isaiah today?

Simple, because the prophet Isaiah says the Spirit of God has anointed him to proclaim that happiness is indeed possible, especially for those in greatest need thereof – and it is God who makes it possible.

Freedom for the oppressed, prisoners set free, lame and deaf and blind healed, debts being cancelled – and the year of the Lord's Jubilee becoming a reality. Happiness, joy, liberation. A reality.

Can you see why it relates to Mr Putin's depressing statement?

Can you see why a relationship with God as the source of happiness could make much sense to Leo Tolstoy who knew where to look to find true happiness, but why a multimillionaire who gained his wealth through ill gains and is trying to retain his power at all costs even to the increased oppression of the very people he is responsible for will struggle to grasp the essence of happiness? No wonder he publicly states there is no such thing as happiness.

Not so the Prophet Isaiah who says – Listen up, the Spirit of God moves me to tell you that God brings hope and promises joy, God promises to clothe you in joy in stead of in mourning.

How?

By setting you free from that which keeps you captive, physically, emotionally, spiritually.

God promises forgiveness, liberation, the lifting of that which enslaves people to the point of losing hope.

Like a father who promises his child, I will be there for you when you need me, because you are my child and I love you.

That is what the covenant is at its core. The covenant that today's scripture reading refers to. The covenant that I have discussed during one of our services in the past.

So when the returning exiles feel they are sitting in complete misery having lost all that was dear to them as they return from captivity to a land that is destroyed – then the Prohpet says – God promises you liberation and restoration. Have hope. Hope in God. And make that hope a reality by taking care of one another and you will be taken care of yourself.

Now jump forward some 400 years or so – and we see Jesus of Nazareth in his first sermon, his inaugural service in his own hometown of Nazareth. He chooses as his Scripture for the day this very text we read today from Isaiah. You can read all about it in the astonishing Luke chapter 4.

Jesus reads this manifesto of hope, of God's paradise order being restored – and then boldly states to the congregation in the synagogue: "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your very midst."

This very text of Isaiah 61 then becomes the manifesto for the life of Jesus in the Gospel of Luke. Luke

describes what Jesus does and accomplishes progressively as

First filled by the Spirit of God

Then proclaiming the good news of God to the poor, healing the broken-hearted, setting captives free, proclaiming on the one hand the anger of God to those who abuse their power and on the other hand proclaiming the abundant grace and mercy of God to those in despair yearning for forgiveness or restoration by God.

In Jesus we witness the physical and spiritual embodiment of God's dream for humanity: hope of a life lived in wholeness, filled with joy and compassion.

This does not mean that there is no pain or evil or deceit or brokenness in this world. Looking at the news, looking at the state of our own broken societies, being honest about our own personal struggles we are only too aware that we have reason to mourn, reason to be heartbroken.

But, the prophet Isaiah reminds us that Jahwe is the God of hope and healing, restoration and compassion, particularly amidst life's brokenness.

And Jesus of Nazareth embodied the message and reality of God's revolution of love: healing, caring, bringing justice and forgiveness, turning mourning into joy. He was so committed to this vision of God for humanity that he put his life on the line to accomplish it.

So, if today you are wondering whether there is such a thing as happiness in life, let me and Isaiah remind you that there can be. If you feel broken down and tired of having to struggle with the brokenness around you and inside you, take heart, the Spirit of God and the life of Jesus Christ invites you to know that you are loved, you are not forgotten, the heart of God is to turn our mourning into dancing, to turn our clothes of despair into clothes of praise.

May I also invite you, if you are able to, and by the grace of God you probably are, to reach out to that neighbour, that friend, that person you know who are in even greater pain and need than you are, and to touch their life with a word or a gesture of care? Because often it is in being the one that gives other hope and help that one experiences the blessing of happiness yourself.

Amen

A new heaven, a new earth

Rev. Alan Childs

Scripture passage:

Isaiah 65:17-25



Hope is so precious, so powerful. Hope can light a fire in your belly. Hope can lift your sights higher and strengthen your efforts. As long as there is life, there is hope.

And my oh my, how this world needs hope today.

With tens of thousands dying daily of Covid, mostly in poorer countries, amidst international vaccine inequalities, with millions of refugees being displaced by famines and conflicts, mostly in predominantly Muslim countries, with millions suffering racism, mostly in predominantly Christian countries, with billions of living organisms dying because of humanity's carbon-based consumerism, mostly driven by wealthy countries.

Hopelessness can creep into our hearts and minds like a cancer, eating away at our faith and our compassion. Hope is all the more needed, like a vaccine against despondency.

So where does one turn to for hope? To the politicians, to the government, to the royalty, to the corporations, to the educators, the artists, the industrialists, the church, the NHS, the scientists, the media? Maybe to all of them, maybe to none of them?

After all, it depends what is broken and needs fixing, or what is dying and needs reviving, or even what is out of hand and needs curbed or stopped altogether.

But without having hope of improving matters, without the prospect of healing hearts or reconciling communities or cleaning oceans or saving children caught up in the sex trade or liberating the ignorant from fundamentalism – with the dream of the better, the safer, the more beautiful – without that spark of a brighter future, there will be no healing or improvement or liberation.

No wonder Martin Luther King held the dream of a better future without racism and institutionalised injustice first and foremost.

No wonder people who really revolutionised human society were often called dreamers or visionaries – from Francis of Assisi to Mahatma Gandhi, from Nelson Mandela to Jesus Christ, from Mother Theresa to Malala Yousafzai, from Dorothy Day to Greta Thunberg. They saw a different future – one that is possible. One that can be better. One that is worth living and striving, sometimes even arguing or dying for, but definitely worth hoping for. Dreamers, visionaries, prophets – sketching a different future, painting a picture of a new day, teaching us the song about what we haven't found yet – but which is worth searching for.

They, like the Prophet Isaiah, invites us to a better place. Sometimes they sketch the ideal, often they

invite or urge us along.

The prophet Isaiah talks about [a new heaven, a new earth, a](#) place where people get their just reward and are not treated unfairly, where the vulnerable are protected, where violence and abuse have stopped and peace and healing is the norm, not the exception.

And he does so in a city that was devastated, amidst a people that were desolate, amongst believers who were having doubts and second thoughts about their faith.

It reminds me of one of my favourite songs, which is also a favourite of many other folks of my generation, the Gen-Xers'. It is the song by the Irish band U2, called "Where the streets have no name". Written during the 1980s in the middle of the low-level war in Northern-Ireland in the Troubles. That divisive ethno-nationalist period of conflict that lasted about 30 years from the late 1960s. The heart breaking struggle that destroyed families, communities and countless lives. The lyrics were inspired by a story that their lead singer, Bono, shared about Belfast, Northern Ireland, where a person's religion and income were evident by the street on which they lived. The names of the streets clearly indicated whether you are in a Protestant or in a Catholic street and neighbourhood. And good luck to you, pal, if you found yourself in the wrong street if you didn't belong there.

So the lyrics of the song then paints a picture of a new time and space, a one day or a somewhere, when and where the streets won't have any names so it really does not matter anymore. This then is a metaphor the Irish band uses to plead for the sectarian violence to become something of the past. And this was in the midst of a seemingly never-ending cycle of bombs and the riots, police brutality and revenge killings. The light of hope shines brightest when the night is at its darkest. The rest of the song paints further pictures of an end to droughts and ecological destruction with the invitation to all who hear the song to join in, in striving to build that place, that somewhere where love and community will reign.

It really is like a modern day rock anthem version of the Hebrew Prophet Isaiah's invitation as the song recognizes this contrast between the broken present reality and a future, potential, world where there aren't such animosity and divisions – where the lion and the lamb will lie down together in peace.

This all raises the question, when will that one day be? At the end of time? If there is such a thing. At the end of some cosmic war between good and evil? If there is such a thing.

Or maybe it has already started.

Maybe that is what Jesus meant when he kept saying the Kingdom of God has come.

Maybe that is what Jesus started of with his life and death, when he elevated the humiliated and humbled the lofty, when he brought the marginalised women and children and foreigners and needy and sick and outcasts right into the very centre everyone's focus – saying that it is for such as these that God blesses, whilst he exorcised the abusers, the self-righteous, the arrogant, the deceitful.

Could that be when the seed of the future heaven and earth sprouted? When evil buried the innocent embodiment of the God of love in the grave only to germinate and burst forth with new life, seeding in the hearts and lives of his followers not only the hope, but the desire and the reality of a new heaven and a new earth. To become not a light under a bushel but a city on a hill – a beacon of hope and direction and community.

The question then is not really when – but who. Who will be building such a new community? Who will be bringing together the lion and the lamb? Who will be healing the sick, correcting injustices, protecting the vulnerable, standing up for the rights of the disenfranchised?

It will not be the ruthless dogs of war, it's unlikely to be the capitalistic captains of industry, most probably not the media moguls nor power-hungry politicians.

Isaiah says it will be God.

And Jesus says, being God, I have demonstrated and initiated this process, now I send you as my followers to do just that – to go and make God's new heaven and new earth a reality.

And that is where we finish the series of the Prophet Isaiah – and I invite you to join in as we start with a new Book in the Bible next week that picks up this exact thread. The Book of Acts is an eventful look at the start of the early church, the start of the followers going out to become little communities that lived and shared and spoke about this new reality that is the Kingdom of God that is constantly coming in the here and now.

As I wrap up this series of the wonderful Book of Isaiah, I leave you with the words of a modern-day musical prophet, the influential Christian musician, Rich Mullins, who wrote a song with the curious title, the Maker of noses, in which he echoes the words of Isaiah when he sings:

*"I believe there is a place
Where people live in perfect peace
Where there is food on every plate
Where work is rewarded and rest is sweet
Where the colour of your skin won't get you in or keep you out
Where justice reigns and truth finally wins

And I hear the voice of a million dreams
Then I wake in the world that I'm partly made of
And the world that is partly my homemaking
And I hear the song of a heart set free
That will not be kept down by the fury and sound
Of a world that is wasting away.

But I believe there'll come a time,
Lord I pray it's not too far off,
There'll be no poverty or crime
There'll be no greed and we will learn how to love
And children will be safe in their homes
And there'll be no violence out on the streets
The old will not be left alone
And the strong will learn how to care for the weak
And everyone I know hopes it comes real soon

And everyone I know wants to go there too
But when I ask them how to do it they seem so confused
Do I turn to the left? Do I turn to the right?"*

*When I turn to the world they gave me this advice
They said boy you just follow your heart –
But my heart just led me into my chest
They said follow your nose –
But the direction changed every time I went and turned my head
And they said boy you just follow your dreams –
But my dreams were only misty notions
But the Father of hearts, and the Maker of noses, and the Giver of dreams He's the one I have
chosen
And I will follow Him”*

Will you join me?

Amen.

Other Sermon Series Booklets

Matriarchs and Patriarchs—a series of sermons preached on the Matriarchs and Patriarchs of the Old Testaments in January and February 2021 by Rev Alan Childs and Martin Pearce.

Rights and Responsibilities—a series of sermons preached on passages from the book of Deuteronomy in March and April 2021 by Rev Alan Childs and Graeme Henderson and a conversation with Gavin Ryalls.

Full services are available on our YouTube Channel—[Craigsbank Parish Church](#).



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