

11th June 2017

Isaiah 1.1-8; 6.1-13

Britain elected a new government this week. But only just. A hung Parliament leaves us all in a state of division and instability. Theresa May continues as Prime Minister though her decision to call the snap election has backfired and instead of strengthening her position has found her position weakened dramatically. Whoever you voted for, it is right and proper as Christians that we pray for those who will lead us as a nation. It is a thankless task being a leader. You are the first person out of the trench and into the firing line. She needs our prayers and as a church going lady we can also pray that she is open to God's leading and guidance on how to help this nation of ours. She has a daunting in tray.

The election has revealed some of the major issues and divisions in our nation at the moment. Security and protecting ourselves from the enemy within, namely jihadists who want to wage ideological and theological war on us. The care of our elderly, especially end of life care and social care. The care of our young, providing adequate funding for education and university. A possible division between the young and the elderly. Investment in

the NHS. The widening gulf between rich and poor and the widening pay gap between executive pay and the stagnant pay of the workers on the shop floor. The impact of austerity cuts on the poorest and those who can't work. Keeping the economy going especially as ill winds may be gathering as a result of the Brexit process. Brexit of course overshadows everything and within days Theresa May will have tricky negotiations with our European neighbours who are now not so sure she will last her course as prime minister. You really wouldn't want her job would you?

Over the next few weeks we are going to be looking at the prophet Isaiah in our sermon slot. The prophets of the Old Testament were like social commentators of their day. They mixed politics with religion. I know you are not supposed to do that if you want to digest your breakfast but the bible is full of it, enough to give you indigestion sometimes.

Isaiah is a complex book written over a few centuries by probably a few authors. If that is a shock to you then come along to my next bible Class on Thursday 6th July and we'll discuss Isaiah then. Most scholars believe the first 39 chapters relate to King Ahaz reign 736-715 BC and then king Hezekiah 715 to 686 BC. The latter part chapters 28-

39 look forward to the fall of Jerusalem and the exile of its leadership to Babylon which happened in 587 BC.

Isaiah is the first of the great prophetic books though he wasn't the first great prophet. That honour goes to Amos. Neither did prophets such as Amos and Isaiah fulfil their ministries by writing books. Prophets fulfilled their ministry by showing up in public places such as the temple courtyards and market squares and declaiming to anyone who would listen and also to people who didn't wish to listen. A bit like politicians out on the election rally pitching up and doing a stump speech and coping with any hecklers – although this general Election some politicians were cosseted from meeting the real public so they couldn't get any bad press or embarrassing questions.

You can get an idea from reading Jeremiah and also the tactics of Jesus how prophets in those times went about pitching their message. Isaiah chapter 8 gives details of how some of their messages were written down. Because their prophecies were written down in this haphazard way it explains why the books of the prophets don't unfold in a systematic way but are a collection of separate messages strung together.

Often, though, the same themes recur, as they do in Jesus teaching. There's a story about a Christian preacher whose

people accused him of always restating the same message; (surely not me!). When they took notice of that one; he responded, he would preach another.

But Isaiah does have some structure: in the first part of the book there are messages about Judah and Jerusalem, then about the nations around them and then the destiny of the world and that pattern repeat itself in the second half of the book.

Context is always important, in any writing. The historical context of Isaiah's writing which he speaks about is broadly four themes or problems:

He was working at a time when the first big Middle Eastern Empire, Assyria, started taking an interest in Judah, and even more in Ephraim, which was more powerful and sat on trade routes in which Assyria was interested. Judah and Ephraim were the northern and southern kingdoms of what is now Israel. So one question the prophet deals with is how to handle relations with the big power and with neighbouring peoples. Assyria invaded both Ephraim and Judah and caused devastation. Later the power of Babylon and that of Persia would be key factors in the latter chapters of Isaiah.

The traditional religion of the country (Canaanite religion') continued to attract people, especially in Ephraim. That temptation continued in Judah into the Babylonian and Persian periods. It was a down to earth, everyday faith that gave people ways of doing something about everyday questions that concerned them such as encouraging the crops to grow and the animals to breed, being able to have a baby, staying in contact with your relatives who had passed and discovering things about the future. Yet it was at odds with the worship of Israel's God. So there is a tension and clash with other faiths and belief systems.

Thirdly economic and political developments in the two nations, and an increase in urbanization, had generated a situation in which some people were able to acquire increasing amounts of land. Instead of each extended family having its own land, many families became dependent on a smaller number of landowners and on the landowners' mercy when life was tough. People such as widows and orphans were especially vulnerable. In other words the prophet spoke about the plight of the poorest and most vulnerable in the land.

Finally in the cities people in power made use of dishonest methods and manipulation of the legal system to add to their wealth and they were thus able to live even more self-indulgent lives. The system seemed to be rigged in their favour and the wealthy and powerful were just getting more wealthy and powerful.

Just by that basic overview and context I hope you can see that the writing of Isaiah, nearly three thousand years ago, still has relevance for us today in 21st century Britain. Not much changes does it!

Isaiah kicks off in chapter one in making the point that we need to marry up how we worship with how we live our lives outside the context of worship.

He asks the question what use is the worship of Judah to God. The problem was not only their outward sacrifices for he refers to their prayers. He doesn't suggest that they worshipped only externally and not in their hearts. It looks as if they meant every hallelujah. The problem was the disparity between what they meant in their hearts as they worshipped and what they did in their lives outside the context of worship. He likens them to the rulers of Sodom

and Gomorrah because they were about as responsive to God as the rulers of those two cities were. When they lift their hands to God in prayer all God can see is the blood on their hands. They need to clean themselves up. The community needs to cease being the kind of city where people can be ill-treated and oppressed and can lose their lives for reasons that are nothing to do with them. The sin of Sodom and Gomorrah as the Bible points out here and in other places, noticeably Jesus in Matthew 10.14-15, had nothing to do with homosexuality but it was about not treating strangers and visitors with respect, violating hospitality and dignity.

The chapter starts with the comparison of the relationship between Israel and God as a child and their father. They are not little children but teenagers or young adults now. The father is still the authority figure. He sets the moral standards. But they have stopped taking any notice of him. So he has disciplined them. And they are like an individual son who been chastised but who is still asking for more punishment.

Why should you be beaten anymore?

Why do you persist in rebellion?

Your whole head is injured,
your whole heart afflicted.

⁶From the sole of your foot to the top of your head

there is no soundness –
only wounds and bruises
and open sores,
not cleansed or bandaged
or soothed with oil.

⁷Your country is desolate,
your cities burned with fire;
your fields are being stripped by foreigners
right before you,
laid waste as when overthrown by strangers.

It is painful when the nation you are part of seems to have forgotten or deliberately turned away from its foundations. Britain is no longer a Christian nation yet the Christian faith has laid the foundations for most of our culture and our values, our laws and our rights. As we become more detached from the source of those values and visions will we lose our moorings?

The Elders on their away day yesterday were considering a paper written by Theo Hobson that was in last month's Reform magazine about secular humanism – the dominant value of our society today and how they have their roots in the Christian faith – our belief that all are created equal and the Protestant insistence upon the liberty of

conscience. Hobson urges us not to criticise this movement but to affirm it whilst at the same time pointing out that the values of our secular society are too thin – they don't offer people meaning to inspire them or sustain them in difficulty. Idealism is superficial for it lacks an account of why we should seek the good of all humanity, instead it assumes that this is somehow normal. But history is littered with how societies can change their mood and go from one fad to another. We need to ask where our values come from and help people see the enduring reason and value for faith in God as the rock and refuge of all we hold dear.

At a personal level it is heart-breaking when members of your family brought up in the church wander away. Haranguing them, like Isaiah, is unlikely to make any difference apart from getting your own anger off your chest. People don't usually change when they get into an argument. Change comes more slowly when they may eventually get to a place when they see a need to change or come to a different experience.

I shared a story on the Gower retreat last month from Rob Parsons who was talking about people who gave up faith but then came back. He drew in the parable of the Prodigal Son to describe how God is waiting, in love and forgiveness, for them to see their need and return home.

He told a story of a woman who had written to him and said how her daughter was 18 when she had walked out of their home after a row. She didn't get in touch, and they didn't know whether she was dead or alive. At night, as this mother and father turned off the lights before they went to bed, she would always say to her husband, 'leave the porch light on'. And every Christmas she would put up a little Christmas tree in the front of the house, its light shining as she used to when her daughter was a child.

That couple didn't see their daughter for six years. Then one day, out of the blue, she knocked on their door and fell into her mother's arms. She said:

'Mum, I so often wanted to come home, but I was too ashamed. But sometimes, in the early hours of the morning, I would drive my car into our street and just sit there. I used to gaze at the house: you always left a light on. And at Christmas I would do the same: just sit there in the darkness and look at the Christmas tree you had put outside – I knew it was for me.'

The story of the prodigal son tells of a Father who left the light on. The return of the prodigal was of course nearly derailed by the bitter resentment of the elder son. But the love of the Father managed to overcome that. The story symbolised God's willingness to forgive and welcome us

back and that we can always come home, no matter what we have done or said. There will always be a light on.

I think such an approach is more likely to change people than Isaiah having a go. But maybe there is always a place for shouting at people too?

By chapter 6 we actually come to Isaiah's account of how he came to be proclaiming his message. He has a vision of the Lord on his throne. The Lord is surrounded by seraphs animal, bird and human like creatures. There is an overwhelming sense of holiness. God's holiness is on an unequalled kind. God is holy to the power of three: holy holy holy is the Lord God almighty sing the seraphs.

Isaiah feels impure and unworthy, he lives among impure people. He perhaps recognises what we all may feel – that we are all implicated in the wrong done by the group we belong to (whether family, church, town, city, nation). But God cleanses his lips by a sacramental action to enable his lips to become a means of serving God.

Elsewhere in scripture God drafts the likes of Moses and Jeremiah into his service. Some people in scripture and in life, feel reluctant conscripts in the Lord's service. They are backed into a corner and can't get out. They work for God maybe through a sense of duty and even resentment. It doesn't make for the most joyous of followers – just

read the whole story of Jeremiah and Moses and you'll get the point. But Isaiah actually volunteers when God asks the question: Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? Isaiah responds: 'Here am I. Send me!'

His willing volunteering is often where most Christian preaching on this passage ends. Which isn't surprising considering what happens next. God is looking for someone to declare judgment on this polluted people. The judgment will take the form of telling them that they're never going to understand what God is saying to them and doing to them. Indeed the aim of Isaiah's preaching is to bring about that incomprehension so that they won't repent and find healing. Not surprisingly Isaiah is appalled and will now be regretting the way he volunteered for a pointless task. Comparisons with Theresa May could be appropriate at this point.

'For how long?' is his forlorn protest? It is a question that often recurs in scripture when someone protests about how long God intends to let some calamity continue. The answer is a long time – until a holy seed, a remnant survives.

Perhaps the aim of God is to provoke a response. It's always the aim of a message of judgement that it should

make it possible for God not to implement it, though that aim may fail, and then the judgment will indeed happen.

Some people are not for listening. Some people are not for turning. No matter how much you try to get through to them, challenge them, nothing will budge. Is this the end of the story? All of life is in God's hands. God will preserve the holy seed in the stump.

If we go back to the future of the church in this country many are fearful of our increasing irrelevance to most people in our society and the growing demographic time bomb – that we are not retaining our young people and we are all getting older – which obviously means that one day on current projections, the church will literally die out.

Emerging churches are trying to appeal to a younger generation aware that the traditional churches are in deep trouble and are distant from popular culture. Whether they will survive is all in God's hands. Whether we in the more traditional churches will survive – is in God's hands. God gives the growth. We can play our part of course and we can frustrate the work of God or co-operate with the work of God. But at the end of the day God gives the growth.

We pray in God's plan there is a holy seed, a stump left to revive the work of the Lord in this land. Lord restore your church, restore your nation. Have mercy on us we pray for Jesus sake. Amen.

Bibliography: John Goldingay, Isaiah for Everyone SPCK
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