

SERMON – 23/10/22
'The State of the Nation'

Isaiah 1:1-20

“Listen to what the Lord is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you.” (Isaiah 1:10)

Over the years I have often preached sermons from Isaiah – some of the most familiar and significant passages in the whole of the Old Testament are to be found within its pages and it is one of the books most often quoted in the New Testament so we often hear Isaiah's words not least in the run-up to Christmas and to Easter – but I have long wanted to preach my way through the whole of the book because Isaiah is to the Old Testament what Romans is to the New Testament, a key text that offers a sweep over the whole message of the Scriptures. It is of course a mammoth book and so tackling it as a Bible reader is hard enough, never mind as a preacher, but if we are prepared to put some effort in we will undoubtedly find great reward. We will see how we get on between now and Christmas and hopefully continue into the new year.

My conviction that Isaiah has a message for our time is reinforced by the fact that the title that I gave to this first sermon when I was planning the series in the summer is 'The State of the Nation' little knowing all those months ago that we would be where we are in our own national life this particular week. God's Word is living and active, and in the words of our text today from this opening chapter I want to encourage you to “Listen to what the Lord is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you.” Let us be open to God's message to us today and every day as individuals, as a church and as a nation.

In Isaiah's time, the twin nations of Israel and Judah were under military threat from the Assyrians – during Isaiah's lifetime the northern kingdom of Israel would be over-run by the invaders although at that stage the southern kingdom of Judah would survive, but Isaiah goes on to warn of a threat much further down the line and history tells us that the Babylonians will ultimately carry the Jews into exile.

"Your country has been devastated, says Isaiah to the people of his day." (v.7) In our time, although we are not directly affected by the Russian invasion of Ukraine it is impacting on the wider world beyond the ways that are immediately obvious to us and it reminds us how uncertain the future is. We are also being assailed by the cost of living crisis on top of the continuing fall-out from the past nearly three years since Covid first strutted onto the world stage, and organisations as diverse as the NHS and the Church are facing turmoil and upheaval never witnessed in our lifetime. People in our country today are asking exactly the same kind of questions as the people of Judah were in Isaiah's day. And in Jerusalem then as in Westminster now there was a leadership vacuum, a context ripe for the receipt of a message from God. What is the Lord saying through Isaiah to the people of God all those years ago and what is the Lord saying through Isaiah to us today? Let's listen.

Firstly, there is a call to look beneath the circumstances for deeper causes and for what is really happening in the purposes of God. Isaiah doesn't mince his words. Listen, he says to the earth and the sky; listen, he says to the people. God says this through the prophet: "Cattle know who owns them and donkeys know where their master feeds them. But that is more than my people Israel know. They don't understand at all." (v.3) I'm sure I'm not alone in these days in wanting to scream, not just at our political leaders but at the journalists reporting on unfolding events and at those commentators and members of the public whose opinions and observations they also report. The whole world's gone mad. But actually, it was ever thus because it is only by the grace of God that we human beings don't end up in a pickle much more often than we do. Isaiah describes his own country of Judah as a sinful nation, a corrupt and evil people who have rejected the Lord and turned their backs on the holy God of Israel. Are we not the same? Do we not need to recognise that we are rebellious too. Isaiah says that the people are sick to the core. "Your heart and mind are sick and from head to foot there is not a healthy spot on your body, he says." (v.5-6) The bad news that we too have to face up to is that we are not living as God intended us to and that is both a cause and a consequence of our rebellion against the Lord.

Do you hear commentators on the current political turmoil pointing out that we have the leaders as a nation? Don't we deserve what we have, because as a country it was we who elected them? Instead there is simply a pointing of fingers – it's his fault, it's her fault, it's their fault. And we hear calls for a general election because that (people say) will solve all our problems, except that whoever we elect they are just as likely to lead us into the same or similar predicaments. "Cattle know who owns them and donkeys know where their master feeds them. But that is more than my people Israel know. They don't understand at all." And, unpalatable though it may be to say so, we are just the same.

Faced with that situation, Isaiah calls the people to listen up and to pay attention to what God is saying. Now, if you think that what I have said so far has been addressed to others, listen carefully because God is speaking through Isaiah not just to those in wider society, those who might be said not to know better, but to specifically to those who profess to know God and who seek to honour Him. God says through the prophet: "Do you think I want all these sacrifices you keep offering to me? I have had more than enough. Who asked you to bring me all this when you come to worship me? Who asked you to do all this tramping about in my Temple? It's useless to bring your offerings. I am disgusted with the smell of the incense you burn. I cannot stand your New Moon Festivals, your Sabbaths and your religious gatherings. They are all corrupted by your sins" (vv.11-13) Ouch. OK, we may not bring sacrifices to worship or burn incense or celebrate New Moon Festivals, but, my brothers and sisters, this is addressed to *us*, to the people of God in our time as much as in Isaiah's day, to the Church of Jesus Christ. Whatever it is that we make much of in our expressions of worship, whether it's the building in which we gather or the clothes we wear, or the type of music we sing, or the style of words we use or the tradition we have inherited or the innovation that is being called for, these things can just as easily detract from our focus on the living God as they can enable it, so we need to be consciously directing our thoughts Godward in all that we do as a church and as disciples so that it is God's Word that becomes the foundation for the way we shape our attitudes and make our choices and live our lives

and so that our faith has consequences for the good of our whole community and society.

Specifically, Isaiah calls the people (us included) to repentance. "Wash yourselves clean, he says. Stop all this evil that I see you doing. Yes, stop doing evil and learn to do right. See that justice is done – help those who are oppressed, give orphans their rights and defend widows." (v.16-17) Here we are taken to the primary call that God has given to human beings throughout the ages – the call to recognise that none of us are what we have been created to be and that we need to return to the Lord, to leave behind what does not find favour in the eyes of God, to acknowledge the ways of God's Kingdom and to embrace them, walking in the light, consciously choosing what is right over what is wrong, rejecting what is evil and standing up for what is good, and letting that impact on the way we live, the way we treat other people, the way we vote.

We see it here and we will see it throughout the book - the prophet does not hold back from telling it how it is, no matter how much his listeners may kick back against his bluntness. The fact of the matter is that the reason the world, the nation, the community, the church, our families and our own lives are in the state they are in is that deep down we have rejected the Lord and we are paying the consequences. We each suffer in our inter-personal relationships when we act selfishly; in community and in society, the vulnerable are oppressed because of the greed of people like you and me whose first instinct is to look after number one; in the fellowship of the church, God has nothing but contempt for anything we offer that does not give Him the highest honour; the well-being of the most vulnerable in the national and the international sphere is dealt a death blow whenever those in power (and that includes the electorate) indulge themselves instead of serving for the common good.

There is no question about it – there is bad news to share about humanity and Isaiah is not afraid to declare it. "Listen to what the Lord is saying to you. Pay attention to what our God is teaching you." But hear this also, and make no mistake about it: Isaiah proclaims good news too – his own name means literally 'the Lord is Salvation' and the Gospel he preaches that comes to

fruition through Jesus, the Messiah whose coming he announces, is of salvation from the mess that we and this world are in because of our rebellion against God. "The Lord says, 'Now, let's settle the matter. You are stained red with sin but I will wash you as clean as snow. Although your stains are deep red you will be as white as wool.'" (v.18)

Pray for yourself; pray for those around you here in the church; pray for those who are offering themselves to lead our nation in these trying times; pray for the leaders of the nations – China, Russia, Ukraine, the United States. Paul takes up Isaiah's theme when he writes: "All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God." (Rom.3:23) But if you hear nothing else in what I have said this morning, listen to this good news: "While we were still sinners, Christ died for us." (Rom.5:8)

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