

SERMON – 11/12/22

'A Child is Born'

Introduction

As we continue our readings from the Book of the Prophet Isaiah this morning we come to what is perhaps one of the most famous Old Testament readings used at Christmas time, except that we usually only hear three selected verses of it and we never hear it in its context.

Remember that King Ahaz and the people of Jerusalem are beside themselves with fear under threat from their northern neighbours. Isaiah tells them that they need not fear – 'God is with us,' he says: 'Immanuel'; the threat they fear so much is in fact going to be completely neutralised by the sudden appearance of an even greater force from Assyria further east and north, which will overwhelm Samaria and Damascus but which (crucially) will not take Jerusalem.

In today's reading, parts of northern Israel, the tribal lands of Zebulun and Naphtali in what we know as Galilee, have already been taken by the Assyrians, and Samaria will soon fall. The people of Judah are earnestly seeking guidance in the face of deep uncertainty – the trouble is they are looking for it in all the wrong places and as a result they are enveloped in gloom and despair, darkness and hopelessness.

In that context (the one we *don't* usually read when we turn up this passage every Christmas) Isaiah has a message of real joy to proclaim, and I'd like you to listen to it with fresh ears this morning, and with an eye on our current context where so many people, facing an uncertain future this Christmas, are also looking for guidance in all the wrong places and are also overwhelmed with darkness.

This is the Good News of Christ. Let's hear the Word of God.

Reading: Isaiah 8:19 to 9:7

"A child is born to us! A son is given to us! And he will be our ruler. He will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace. His royal power will continue to grow. His kingdom will always be at peace." (Isaiah 9:6,7)

I have honestly lost count of the number of times I have made these words the focus of a message I have preached at Christmas services over the last 35 years, never mind simply reading them or quoting them as part of a service that has perhaps been more focussed on another passage of the Bible. And that's before I have sung these words whether in the paraphrase that we will join in singing in a few minutes or in the spine-tinglingly inspiring version in Handel's *Messiah* – 'Wonderful, Counsellor, the Mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace.'

As I have said before, I have long had the desire to preach a series of sermons on Isaiah where we can take a bit of time to read the amazing words of this book in their context and to deepen our understanding of what they would have meant to those who originally heard them in order that we may understand them better in our own context, and while I recognise that there is a bit of effort involved in that (not just for me but for you as well) I hope you will agree that it sheds more light on our understanding of the Good News we celebrate at this time of year. Perhaps it was for such a time as this that I have finally set myself the challenge of preaching through Isaiah because just as in the prophet's own time there was widespread anxiety in the face of multiple threats and grave uncertainty today and just as there was an almost universal reluctance (even amongst those who considered themselves the faithful people of God) to hear what God was trying to say to them, so in our day (probably more so than at any other time in my life) there is also such a spirit of fear about the future and paradoxically such an indifference to the Word of God.

I'd like to raise three questions this morning in the light of what we have read here in Isaiah 8 and 9 and to relate them to our own context as well as to Isaiah's.

The first question is this: where do people look for guidance? What Isaiah found as he sought to bring God's message to the people of Jerusalem was that folk were queuing up at the fortune tellers and the mediums, consulting the dead on behalf of the living, as he puts it. And you don't need to look very far today to find what are variously described as holistic fairs, spiritual fairs, psychic fairs where all kinds of questionable experiences are

offered at all kinds of prices to those who are looking for answers to their deepest questions in village halls and hotel functions suites up and down the country. Although this quote is often mistakenly attributed to GK Chesterton it was in fact the Belgian playwright Emile Cammaerts who said, 'When people choose not to believe in God, they do not thereafter believe in nothing but become capable of believing in anything.' I've heard of Christians taking a table at such fairs and simply offering to listen to people's story and to pray with them – perhaps it's because they don't make a charge for such services but they often find they have the longest queues, much to the annoyance of the fortune tellers and mediums. Perhaps that's for the best. As Isaiah says here, 'What they tell you cannot keep trouble away.' (Isaiah 8:20) In fact, it will inevitably bring even more trouble.

Of course people are not only looking for guidance from mediums and fortune tellers. It has long been the case that people have looked for answers to their problems at the bottom of a bottle, but in addition to widespread alcohol dependency, Scotland has one of the highest incidences of drug abuse in the whole world. Perhaps at a lower level of concern, but nonetheless significant, there are increasing numbers of people attending their GP with symptoms of anxiety and the whole health and social care system is creaking because of the breakdown of the informal networks of support that we once considered a normal part of society and the expectation that professional help is required. Fewer and fewer people in our land are seeking guidance from God – it doesn't mean that they are no longer looking for guidance. People are not believing in nothing, they are believing in anything, and the prospects are not looking good.

My second question concerns the consequences of people looking elsewhere than to God for guidance and for answers. And here is where Isaiah paints a *really* bleak picture of the situation in his time that I think, tragically, is also reflected in our time. "The people wander through the land discouraged and hungry; in their anger they curse God. They may look up to the sky or stare at the ground but they will see nothing but trouble and darkness, terrible darkness into which they are being driven." (Isaiah 8:22) It reminds me strongly of the apostle Paul's description in his

letter to the Ephesians of those who 'live in the world without hope and without God.' How many of *our* fellow citizens are currently in just such a predicament, black darkness and utter hopelessness, the consequences of three or more generations of people turning their backs on God and on the rich heritage of Christian faith, and embracing instead the so-called freedoms of the brave new world of secularism.

But hear me well – I say all of that not to depress you but to drive home the good news that Isaiah proclaims here: "The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light. They lived in a land of shadows but now light is shining on them. You've given them great joy, Lord, you've made them happy." (Isaiah 9:2) And how? "A child is born to us! A son is given to us." (Isaiah 9:6) Jews would understand this to be a reference to the birth of King Ahaz's son, who would be one of Judah's greatest monarchs – Hezekiah. 'Wonderful Counsellor, Prince of Peace' and yes he was those things and Judah prospered under his rule. But even allowing for the kind of hyperbole sometimes used to describe ancient rulers, it is a stretch to believe the description of him as Mighty God and Everlasting Father. This clearly points us to great David's greater son, the Messiah, whom we believe has come in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the Son of God.

What it is that we are celebrating at Christmas is so much more than the birth of a child in the somewhat over-romanticised surroundings of a stable. Isaiah here describes in terms that echo the story of creation nothing less than the coming of light into the void of darkness. He speaks of a happiness that eclipses the great joy that his audience would be familiar with in the bringing in of a good harvest, ensuring that the winter wouldn't be a hungry one, or in the sharing of loot brought home after a victory in battle. He proclaims a triumph far exceeding that of the removal of the yoke of slavery God's people had had to shoulder in Egypt and an exodus to a land of even greater promise than Canaan where the messianic king will rule over an eternal peace with righteousness and perfect justice. "The Lord Almighty is determined to do all this," he declares and that promise stands for us today.

Here is transformative good news, something that our society is silently screaming out for. My brothers and sisters in Christ, why would we not share that good news with people who are all around us, neighbours, friends, members of our families who despite their celebration of a version of Christmas in company with what seems like the whole world have not the slightest conception of just how good the news is and of how the light and the joy and the guidance and the hope of God-with-us in the person of Jesus Christ His Son can be ours.

I don't think I voiced my third question this morning: What does God offer those who will put their trust in Him? It's everything we need or could ever want. Don't let's be satisfied with a Christmas that is just passing froth. '*To us a child is born! To us a son is given!*' For goodness sake let's share that message this Christmas, light in in the darkness, hope for despair, life in all its fulness.