

SERMON – 8/1/23
'The Lord is King'

Introduction

Before Christmas we were looking at the opening chapters of the prophecy of Isaiah. You may remember that things were looking bad for the people of Judah. Their neighbours to the north and the east were bearing down upon them but their king – Ahaz – was not interested in seeking God's help or even in listening to God's prophet, even though Isaiah had the good news to proclaim that their enemies would themselves be overrun by the Assyrians before they could reach Jerusalem.

However, while it's important to understand Isaiah's preaching in the context of his own times, there is also a message for *us* to grasp – namely that God is in ultimate charge of the unfolding of history whatever age we live in, and that even beyond time and space there are deeper, spiritual lessons for us to learn about God's eternal purposes. We saw before Christmas how Isaiah's words found particular fulfilment in the coming of Jesus – the Immanuel of whom he writes, and the people walking in darkness seeing a great light when a child is born. As we read on in Isaiah we need to keep looking for Jesus

As we move into the second part of the Book we move on beyond the immediate crisis facing Judah under King Ahaz and we learn that while empires (like Assyria and Babylon) will rise and fall, the Lord is King over all.

Reading: Isaiah 14:1-8, 12-15 and 24-27

"The Lord Almighty has sworn on oath, 'What I planned will happen. What I have determined will be done.'" (Isaiah 14:24)

It is said that history repeats itself and that if we are not willing to learn the lessons of history we are doomed to repeat it, and there is probably an element of truth in both those statements. While circumstances are never identical there are certainly *patterns* that recur, and it is likely that in similar circumstances, similar courses of action will result in similar outcomes.

There are many examples given in the Scriptures of ways in which God's people down through the ages failed to learn the

lessons of the past and ended up suffering the same disastrous consequences that their forebears had – there is a kind of circular inevitability to the history of the kingdoms of Israel and Judah in the books of Kings and Chronicles that leaves us wondering why God's people kept making the same mistakes. And yet we are no different, whether as churches or as individuals. There are plenty of examples both in Scripture and in church history to which we seem to be blind as we career into the same faithless disobedience of God as those who have gone before us. The circular inevitability of our habits of living must be challenged – we each still have a lot to learn about life, about ourselves and about God. So let's be willing to open our lives this new year to better ways of being and of doing.

If we take the Kingdom of Judah in Isaiah's time as an example, there are some important lessons to learn for ourselves as we seek to follow Jesus as individuals and for the church in the stormy waters in which we are currently sailing. In our reading this morning, God holds out to His people the promise of much better times ahead – instead of the threat of invasion, defeat and occupation, there is the hope of relief from pain and suffering, there is the hope of rest and peace and a time when everyone sings for joy. Isaiah paints the evocative picture of the cypress trees and the cedars of Lebanon rejoicing that the enemy king is defeated because there will be no-one to cut them down when he is gone (v.8) Who wouldn't be glad of such respite and hope? The thing is that while the way to receive the promise is by trusting God, the way God's people often proceed is by putting their trust in human alliances with whichever foreign powers seems to be in the ascendant. And we are just the same – Put your trust in God, says the psalmist. Follow me, says Jesus. “Do not conform yourselves to the standards of this world, says the apostle Paul, but let God transform you inwardly by a complete change of your mind.” But as individuals we prefer to be in charge of our own destiny than to let go and let Christ show the way, and as churches we prefer to align ourselves with the latest thinking in the world around us rather than to nail our colours to Christ's mast, and for all the supposed freedom that seems to promise we actually find ourselves back in the trouble from which God offered to rescue us.

In comparison to the promises held out to the people of Judah by Isaiah, an even greater hope is held out to us in Christ, and instead of trying to find our own human ways to manage the challenges and the crises we face, we need to be fixing our eyes on the vision of God's perfect Kingdom and trusting in God's ability to lead us in the ways that will make that a vision a reality sooner rather than later. You see, the fundamental issue is always a lack of faith. God calls us to walk His way but we think we have a better idea. Why would we think that throwing God's guidebook in the bin and charting our own course through life or even through a particular period in life is ever going to end in anything other than disaster?

Well, it's because we have been taken in by the great deceiver and that is the other aspect of this morning's reading that I want to highlight. If you look at verse 12 in different Bible translations you will see that it is translated in a huge variety of different ways.

The Hebrew word being translated literally means 'shining one' but in the Good News translation which we read from earlier it is given as King of Babylon; in the New International Version which I know a lot of you use it is 'morning star'; the King James translation of verse renders it Lucifer (as a specific reference to the Devil), and as usual there are arguments for all of these. It is probably a reference to an old Canaanite myth about a revolt in heaven which would have been familiar to Isaiah's original audience. However, the point of this section is to describe what it actually means to exalt yourself before God so it could actually refer to any one of us at those times when we start to act as if we have a better plan than God does. Isaiah says to you and to me: "You said in your heart, 'I will ascend to the heavens; I will raise my throne above the stars of God; I will sit enthroned on the mount of assembly... I will ascend above the tops of the clouds; I will make myself like the Most High.'" (vv.13-14) It's the great temptation put before Adam and Eve in the Garden of Eden – 'if you eat of the fruit your eyes will be opened and you will be like God.' (Genesis 3:5)

Whoever the 'shining one' may be – whether it is the King of Babylon or today's megalomaniac dictator or self-obsessed

celebrity on the world stage, whether it is Satan himself, or whether it is you or I – Isaiah puts his finger on the matter when he describes the destiny God has in store for any who exalt themselves against Him: “How you have fallen from heaven, shining one, morning star, son of the dawn! You have been cast down to the earth, you who once laid low the nations! But you are brought down to the realm of the dead, to the depths of the pit.” (vv.12,15)

Or in the words of God in our text this morning: 'What I planned will happen. What I have determined will be done.' Who is in charge? God is. Why on earth will we not yield our lives to Him who knows the end from the beginning and who in all things seeks to work out his good, pleasing and perfect will? Whether it is the wayward people of Judah in Isaiah's time, whether it is King Herod at the time of Jesus' birth, whether it is Saul of Tarsus about his murderous business trying to exterminate the first Christians or whether it is you or I setting ourselves up as experts in our own destiny, it is the Lord who is King and who will ultimately have His way.

When the story of 2023 comes to be written this time next year what will the page about you and me and about Kinross Parish Church have to say, I wonder? Will it be one of those chapters describing the circular inevitability of failing to learn lessons, of bad history repeating itself, of pride being put in its place or could it be a triumphant tale of people putting their faith in God and letting Jesus be our Saviour and our Lord, an account of Christ leading and us following.

'What I planned will happen, says the Lord. What I have determined will be done.' Whose side are we on? Which mast are we nailing our colours to? Shortly we will stand together and confess the faith of the universal church in the words of the Apostles' Creed, and in celebrating together the sacrament of baptism we will take hold again by faith of what Jesus has done for each one of us. Don't let any of us just go through the motions today but let us put ourselves firmly in God's hands as we commit ourselves afresh to following Jesus into and throughout this new year.