

SERMON – 15/1/23
'Trust in the Lord'

Introduction

Last week we were reflecting on the fact that, even though there is the promise of hope when we allow the Lord to be King in our lives, we tend to choose the path of self-exaltation albeit experience tells us that that leads to disaster.

This morning's passage focusses on a time in Israel's history when God's people were under threat from the Assyrians but instead of basing their reliance on God and listening to the prophets they went running off to form an alliance with Egypt, and here Isaiah is trying to get his audience to grasp the fact that they are making the wrong choice.

As we listen to what Isaiah says in that context let's be open to what God may be saying to us today. What paths lie before us? What choices do we face? Are we listening for God's Word in the context of the challenges we each face or are we relying on worldly or merely rational answers?

Reading: Isaiah 30:8-18

"The Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says to the people, 'Come back and quietly trust in me. Then you will be strong and secure.' But you refuse to do it." (Isaiah 30:15)

It is sometimes said that in the Church of Scotland our style of worship is very wordy, our methods of teaching are too intellectual and that we don't engage enough with other senses and other ways of engaging with God's message. Jesus told parables (although He gave sermons too) but He also left us with vivid images like that of the camel going through the eye of a needle or setting a light on a stand rather than hiding it under a bucket and it's important not to get stuck in a rut when we are trying to understand the lessons God wants us to learn. How might God be trying to communicate with us this morning?

Isaiah is a master of using multiple ways to communicate what He is trying to tell us about God. He can wag his finger at people with the best of us when he is preaching – to begin with in this chapter he lectures (hectors even) – he is 'to write down in a

book' what he describes as a 'permanent record' (to perpetuity and to eternity the Hebrew says) of how evil the people are – how to win friends and influence people, eh! But actually, here we are, more than two and a half thousand years later reading this 'permanent record' and reflecting on how we are just the same as God's people were then. It's a sorry catalogue: The people are 'always rebelling against God, he says, always lying, always refusing to listen to the Lord's teachings. They tell the prophets to keep quiet. They say "Don't talk to us about what's right. Tell us what we want to hear. Let us keep our illusions. Get out of our way and stop blocking our path. We don't want to hear about your Holy One of Israel".' (vv.9-11) The apostle Paul takes up precisely the same theme when he writes in his second letter to Timothy: "The time will come when people will not listen to sound doctrine, but will follow their own desires and will collect for themselves more and more teachers who will tell them what they are itching to hear. They will turn away from listening to the truth and give their attention to legends." (2 Tim 4:3-4)

Sometimes God speaks through the straight talking of a blunt, hectoring sermon. But Isaiah knows as well as I do that people glaze over and start drifting if you start wagging your finger at them all the time and so he uses other ways than lecturing to get his message across. In this morning's reading I have been really struck by the very vivid pictures Isaiah paints and I'd like you to use your visual imagination today as you grapple with what God may be saying to you, as well as recognising the power of the words and the turns of phrase that the prophet uses.

Were you struck by any of the four vivid pictures in what Isaiah gives us in those few verses we read? They're fantastic.

The first one is of a high wall with a crack down it. Shut your eyes and imagine it. I envisage it like something in a cartoon, you know when some cartoon character like Wile E Coyote looks up at a looming high wall with a crack in it - the crack widens and starts to spread, and *you* know and Wile E Coyote knows what is going to happen and there is it – the wall collapses right on top of the poor beast. 'You're like that wall,' Isaiah says. You know what's going to happen. 'You are guilty... and suddenly you will collapse.' (v.13)

The second image concerns a broken pot. In ancient times broken shards of pottery were used for all kinds of tasks – if you wanted to light a fire you would use a bit of broken pot to take some glowing embers from someone else's fire to get your own one going; if you wanted a drink you would use another bit of broken pottery to scoop some water from a jar. But here Isaiah makes the people realise what a catastrophic situation they are in by telling them that the pot is so comprehensively smashed that 'there is no piece big enough to pick up hot coals with or dip water from a cistern.' (v.14) Just let your imagination run away with that picture.

The third image is of the people planning to escape from their enemies by riding fast horses – too right, Isaiah says, you are going to need to escape – the Assyrians are coming – but here's the message: 'You think your horses are fast enough but those who pursue you will be faster.' (v.16) And he leads straight in to the final, enduring image – you'll all run away and 'nothing will be left of your army except a lonely flagpole on the top of a hill.' (v.17) And what a powerful image that is. It's been a rout, a complete disaster, no-one is left. And there is Isaiah's message summarised in that image – if you trust in the Egyptians, O people of God, all that will remain of you will be the flagpole you once rallied round.

Hold those images in your mind over the coming days and reflect on them. You may well remember them long after any words I have spoken today fade into forgetfulness. Here is the reality of our human condition, the outcome of our reliance on ourselves or on other people rather than on God – it'll all come crashing down and there will be nothing of any usefulness left. Whatever human agency we are relying on in the face of what assails us (in the way the people of Judah put their trust in Egypt in the face of the Assyrian threat), it will not be enough to save us.

There is a great deal being spoken of at the moment about the challenges facing the Church of Scotland, and quite rightly there are steps being taken to address those challenges at every level in the Church, but I rather fear that much of what is being proposed is falling into the same trap as God's people in Isaiah's time did. Just as an alliance with Egypt appeared to offer Judah

the security they were looking for in the face of the Assyrian threat, so many in the church today are looking for what will provide a way forward for the institution – rationalising our buildings, reorganising our structures, modernising our processes, and while all of those practical steps are necessary they do not in themselves constitute the answer. I can't help feeling like Wile E Coyote looking up at the widening crack in the wall as it comes crashing down, and I can't help thinking that the faster we run our horses (whether they are the horses of institutional reform or livestreaming technology or new worship styles) the faster the pace of societal change will outrun our attempts to get ahead of the game and all that will remain is that flagpole on the top of a hill or a country littered with abandoned church buildings. In a famous quote from more than 50 years ago which has often rattled around in my head over the years, Tom Nairn, the Scottish political theorist said this: "As far as I am concerned Scotland will be reborn when the last minister is strangled with the last copy of the *Sunday Post*." Maybe his secularist dream is not so far off being realised.

But remember, as we saw last week – the Lord is King – and though kingdoms and institutions may rise and fall, Christ's Kingdom will unquestionably triumph.

So whether it is the future of the institutional church that is exercising you (maybe that's just me) or whether you have your own particular and personal struggles to deal with at the moment, the message is the same. We need to put our trust in the Lord. That is the message Isaiah brings through this morning's passage in a dramatically understated way and that is the message I want to leave you with today.

Hear the Word of God: In the words of our text this morning: "The Sovereign LORD, the Holy One of Israel, says to the people, 'Come back and quietly trust in me. Then you will be strong and secure.'" (v.15) Or in the closing words of this morning's reading: "And yet the LORD is waiting to be merciful to you. He is ready to take pity on you because he always does what is right. Happy are those who put their trust in the LORD." (v.18)

What does it mean for you today to return to the Lord and quietly trust in Him? What does it mean for us as a congregation here in Kinross, for the new Presbytery of Perth as it seeks to shape the way forward in mission for the coming decade, for the Church of Scotland? Use your imagination but hear the still small voice: 'Come back and quietly trust in me,' says the Holy One.