

SERMON – 12/3/23
'Two Destinies'

Introduction to the Reading

We come this morning to the closing chapter of Isaiah having read our way through some of the key passages in the whole book since October. Not for the first time we have difficult words to read here, but I would like you to come to today's passage with an open heart and a willingness to listen for what God may be saying into your particular situation at this time. I have spoken before about the 'two ways to live' theme that is present throughout the Scriptures and that we have just sung about in the words of Psalm 1. As Isaiah brings his message to a close he highlights that just as human beings face choices in life, so there are consequences to those choices before the judgement seat of God. It is a tenet of our Christian faith that Jesus Christ will come again to judge the living and the dead and, as with so much of what Isaiah writes about, it is Jesus that we should have at the forefront of our minds as we listen to this passage. While there are undoubted warnings to all of us who choose to walk away from God rather than towards God, in Jesus we find grace, mercy, forgiveness and above all hope. Jesus, the Judge of all the earth, is just.

I've asked that the reading be taken this morning from the New International translation rather than from the Good News Bible which has some rather poor renditions of the Hebrew. Let's hear the Word of God.

Isaiah 66:1-6 and 15-24

This is what the Lord says: "Because of what they have planned and done, I am about to come and gather the people of all nations and languages, and they will come and see my glory." (Isaiah 66:18)

On a day by day basis we probably don't often think about the reality of judgement. Perhaps the sight of a traffic warden or a sign warning of the presence of speed cameras may jolt us into remembering that there can be consequences for our actions, but most of us wander through life with little thought to the fact that

one day we will each stand before the judgement seat to give an account of ourselves. How glad I am that it is Jesus Christ our loving Saviour who gave His life for our salvation before whom we will appear, and that along with my guilty plea I will be able to enter the pardon that He has won for me by His death in my place. But surely that prospect must have an impact on the way I live my life here and now.

As we come to the close of these studies in Isaiah and to the stark words he offers us about the reality of judgement to come, I would like to highlight three things that I think we are being called to as God's people in our time just as the prophet was calling those of his own generation more than two and a half thousand years ago. In the face of the choices that face every human being day by day, God is unchanging and we are still called to heed the words of Jesus in the Sermon on the Mount: 'Enter through the narrow gate. For wide is the gate and broad is the road that leads to destruction and many enter through it. But small is the gate and narrow the road that leads to life, and only a few find it.' (Matthew 7:13-14) So what is Isaiah telling us here that that right choice looks like?

Firstly, we are called to humility before the immensity of God. Right at the start of the chapter the Lord declares that 'Heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool' (v.1) But here too Isaiah proclaims the desire of the Lord's heart: "These are the ones I look on with favour: those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word." (v.2)

Throughout the book we have read of those (both individuals and nations) who have come face to face with God but have resolutely stuck to the path they were on and have refused to humble themselves and choose a better way. I think of King Ahaz, refusing to trust God for a sign and preferring to put his hope in alliances with foreign powers instead of the promises of God. By contrast we have read also of those who, in seeing God in glory, have done a complete about turn – think of Isaiah himself confronted in a vision by the Lord high and lifted up. Humbly he acknowledges his own unworthiness and wonderfully he is commissioned to go as God's messenger.

Where do you stand before God today? Is it in arrogance or in humility? Will you choose to continue the way you have always gone or are you ready to acknowledge that in Christ there may be a better way and to humble yourself before the purposes of God even though you may not yet know or understand where they might lead you? "These are the ones I look on with favour," says the Lord through Isaiah: "those who are humble and contrite in spirit, and who tremble at my word."

The second call that we are given in this morning's passage is to discern the glorious reality of God rather than merely to tick some religious box. In verse 3, Isaiah paints quite a shocking picture of religiosity in his own time: "Whoever sacrifices a bull is like one who kills a person, and whoever offers a lamb is like one who breaks a dog's neck; whoever makes a grain offering is like one who presents pig's blood, and whoever burns memorial incense is like one who worships an idol. They have chosen their own ways, and they delight in their abominations." I am left wondering what our worship and our church life actually seem like to God. How much of our Christianity is actually about appearances rather than about the essence of God's Kingdom? If the praise we offer sounds like the kind of thing we are used to (whether that's classical music, Victorian hymnody or contemporary praise songs) would we actually notice if the words we were singing were askew? If the building we meet in shows the outward signs of being a church do we actually overlook what happens inside it? If church is populated by correctly-labelled activities and groups and office-bearers does it necessarily mean that the work of God's Kingdom is being furthered through it? God says through Isaiah here: "When I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened." (v.4) Could we also, actually, have written the Lord out of our faith.

We read in the First Book of Samuel way back in the years before David became king of Israel, of the Ark of God's Covenant being taken captive by the Philistines. Eli the priest falls down dead, his sons are killed in battle and his daughter-in-law gives birth to a son and names him Ichabod (which means 'no glory') saying: "The Glory has departed from Israel, for the ark of God has been captured." (1 Sam.4:22) I wonder if the glory has departed from

Christ's church in our day as we have refused to take God seriously and have been satisfied with what the apostle Paul calls 'a form of godliness' whilst denying its power.

"Hear the word of the LORD, says Isaiah, you who tremble at his word: 'Your own people who hate you, and exclude you because of my name, have said, 'Let the LORD be glorified, that we may see your joy!'" (v.5) Will we just go through the motions of church life or will we discern the glory of the living God and rejoice?

Finally, the prophet prefigures the call that the Lord Jesus will give at the culmination of His earthly ministry just before His return to God's side in glory, what we call the Great Commission.

"I will set a sign among them, says the LORD through Isaiah, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations... that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. And they will bring all your people, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the LORD." (vv.19-20)

At a time in this country where the church as we know it is less than a generation away from disappearing from the fabric of our society, we have a choice, and it's a choice that each and every one of us has to make. We can stay where we are and watch the current decline work itself out in the life of our congregation as with so many others across the country, or we can heed the call of Christ to go and make disciples of all peoples everywhere which includes people from Bowton Road and Sandport to Burnbank Meadows and Acremoar Drive as well as Malawi and Indonesia and Cuba. There are people in our community, our neighbours and friends and family who have not heard of the Lord's fame or seen God's glory. What a terrible indictment on our church that we have been so slow to tell the Good News that sets people free. What will the Lord Jesus have to say to us when we appear before Him – will it be 'Well done, good and faithful servant' or will it be 'Away from me, I never knew you?'

There are two ways to live, and there are two destinies. Will we choose the way of arrogance or of humility before God?

Will we choose the way of outward appearance or of deep reality?
Will we choose the way of sit and wait or of go and tell?

We have really only scratched the surface of this great prophecy of Isaiah over the last few months – there is so much more there for us to uncover if we are willing to do the leg work – but I hope that you have heard the message of hope he proclaims in the face of worldly despair, I hope you have taken hold of the promise of restoration and revival that God makes possible for the people of the covenant, and above all I hope that you have encountered Christ here for it is in Christ alone that there is a future and a hope and it is to Christ that we will all one day be called to give an account.

Come with people of all nations and languages and see God's glory. Jesus says, 'Follow me.'