

Sermon 15 April 2018

Isaiah 1

Isaiah is a book written about the prophet Isaiah who was called by God to speak into the nation of Israel during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah a period of at least 47 years. Isaiah is said to be the son of Amoz the brother or son of Amaziah king of Judah and therefore a member of the royal family who would have had access to the royal courts.

The opening chapter is an introduction to the whole book of Isaiah and is therefore a good place to start looking at what Isaiah had to say to the Jewish nation. The prophecy which Isaiah brings is one firstly of conviction whereby the Jewish nation are charged in God's name of ingratitude, universal corruption and degeneration of the people and for the perversion of justice by their leaders followed by an earnest call to repentance and reformation with the promise of a return to purity and prosperity for those who would recognise the charges against them and turn again to God and to reject the false gods they had been following and put their trust and faith once more in Yahweh for their lives and for their living.

God was not about to enforce this upon them for He had given them freewill but for those who were not prepared to repent of the sinful life they had fallen into then their fate is also clearly spoken out by Isaiah in this chapter and throughout the book.

Let's read through the chapter now and then look at what God through Isaiah has to say to the Jewish nation at the time and also to us today where we are seeing more and more peoples and nations turning their backs on God and going their own way and looking to their own gods and understanding to live their lives:

Isaiah 1 (NIV)

"The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

Hear O heavens! Listen O earth! For the Lord has spoken:

"I reared children and brought them up, but they rebelled against me. The ox knows his master, the donkey his owner's manger, but Israel does not know, my people do not understand."

Ah sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord; they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on Him.

Why should you be beaten anymore? Why do you persist in rebellion? Your whole head is injured, your whole heart afflicted. From the sole of your foot to the top of your head there is no soundness – only wounds and welts and open sores, not cleansed or bandaged or soothed with oil.

Your country is desolate, your cities burned with fire; your fields are being stripped by foreigners right before you, laid waste as when overthrown by strangers. The daughter of Zion is left like a shelter in a vineyard, like a hut in a field of melons, like a city under siege.

Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors, we would have become like Sodom, we would have been like Gomorrah.

Hear the word of the Lord, you rulers of Sodom; listen to the law of our God, you people of Gomorrah!

“The multitude of your sacrifices- what are they to Me?” says the Lord. “I have more than enough of burnt offerings, of rams and the fat of fattened animals; I have no pleasure in the blood of bulls and lambs and goats.

When you come to appear before Me, who has asked this of you, this trampling of My courts?

Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to Me. New moons, Sabbaths and convocations – I cannot bear your evil assemblies. Your New Moon festivals and your appointed feasts My soul hates. They have become a burden to Me; I am weary of bearing them. When you spread out your hands in prayer, I will hide my eyes from you; even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen. Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Take your evil deeds out of my sight! Stop doing wrong, learn to do right! Seek justice; encourage the oppressed.

Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow.

“Comer now let us reason together.” Says the Lord. “Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool.

IF YOU ARE WILLING AND OBEDIENT, you will eat the best from the land; BUT if you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword.” For the mouth of the Lord has spoken.

See how the faithful city has become a harlot! She once was full of justice; righteousness used to dwell in her – but now murderers! Your silver has become dross, your choice wine is diluted with water. Your rulers are rebels, companions of thieves; they all love bribes and chase after gifts. They do not defend the cause of the fatherless; the widow’s case does not come before them.

THEREFORE, the Lord, the Lord Almighty, the Mighty One of Israel declares:

“Ah, I will get relief from My foes and avenge Myself on My enemies. I will turn My hand against you; I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities. I will restore your judges as in days of old, your counsellors as at the beginning. Afterward you will be called the City of Righteousness, the Faithful City.”

Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness. But rebels and sinners will both be broken, and those who forsake the Lord will perish.

You will be ashamed because of the sacred oaks in which you have delighted; you will be disgraced because of the gardens that you have chosen. You will be like an oak with fading leaves, like a garden without water. The mighty man will become tinder and his work a spark; both will burn together, with no one to quench the fire.”

There is a huge amount in there and it would take many hours to break it all down and think about each portion and it might be a worthwhile exercise to do at home, but I want to look at just some of the points this morning and look at comparisons to what I believe is happening in the world today.

The first thing to note is that God's patience is not infinite it tells us in Psalm 145: 8-9

"The Lord is gracious and merciful; slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and His mercy is over all that He has made."

Note "slow to anger" it doesn't say God never gets angry it says He is slow to anger.

This is true for the Jewish nation of Isaiah's time and is also true for our world today. In Isaiah's time the Jewish nation had turned their backs on God, their rulers as we read chapter one, had become arrogant and self seeking, become rich accepting bribes from the highest bidders, receiving lavish gifts in return for favours, cohorting with thieves. Moreover they were ignoring the plight of the widows and orphans.

It is little wonder that with this as their example from the top, the people followed suit and fell into evil ways, and worshipped other gods and held pagan festivals and allowed strangers into their land to pillage as they wished. They still sacrificed to Yahweh, but it was out of duty and not conviction. There was no belief in what they were doing such that their very sacrifices became an abomination in God's sight. Their prayers which they prayed, God would not receive because their hands were "full of blood" because of their sinful ways.

This is when God finally says enough is enough and through the prophet Isaiah speaks out His charges against the rulers and the people of Judah and Jerusalem.

He uses an obedient ox and a donkey who only seeks to have a warm manger for his work as examples of animals that do what is asked of them, whilst despite God having reared and brought up His people in His ways they have chosen to turn their backs on their Father and the good things He has done for them and seek their own way.

But God does not condemn them out of hand, because He is a merciful and loving God He is prepared to give them another opportunity to repent of their wicked ways and to return to a loving, and fruitful relationship with God:

God says to them bluntly and directly what He requires of them to restore that relationship

Verses 16 through 17 tells us and them what God expects:

"Your hands are full of blood; wash and make yourselves clean. Whilst they are steeped in sin and deceit and lies they cannot expect God to look upon them favourably. They need to turn away from these things and look to walk in the way that God would have them; not as a one off, but as

a total change in life style and aspirations, looking once more to God for His plans and purposes for their lives rather than their own or anyone else's and to show it in the way they live their lives.

He reinforces this by telling them :

"Take your evil deeds out of My sight! Stop doing wrong."

Another call to a complete change of lifestyle from the evil that they are doing now to a lifestyle which is pleasing to God and causes no harm to others.

"Stop doing wrong, learn to do right, seek justice."

Some of them have been on the wrong path for so long that they have forgotten what is truly right and just! God urges them to learn to do right from Scripture and from the few Godly men and women who are left. We are told in verses 8 & 9 that "Unless the Lord Almighty had left us some survivors we would have become like Sodom and Gomorrah" but God did leave a remnant and it is to these that the people now need to turn to learn afresh the ways of the Lord God.

Finally they are told to :

"encourage the oppressed, defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow"

As wickedness ensnares a people the first thing that is forgotten is to look after those who cannot take care of themselves, the oppressed, the orphans and the widows. God is saying to them here, these people are important to Me, I need you to look out for them because no one else will but they are precious in My sight.

He then in verse 18 wants to sit down and talk with them, without condemnation , without penitence required, just one condition to be met:

"Come now let us reason together," He tells them.

And offers a free pardon to all who will accept it;

"Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be as white as snow; though they are red as crimson, they shall be like wool. IF YOU ARE WILLING AND OBEDIENT you will eat the best from the land"

Note they and we don't have to be perfect, God knows that we cannot achieve that this side of eternity. We need to be willing, to have willing and open hearts to god's leading in our lives, to turn to Him in repentance and to allow Him to start a reformation of our lives, our hearts and our ongoing life style then He says I will forgive your sins, the slate will be washed pure as snow and we will move forward together in the life I have for you.

The reverse side of the coin is that "if you resist and continue to rebel then you will be devoured by the sword." God has given them every possible opportunity to repent and walk with Him afresh but there will, regrettably, be those who are too blind to see and wish to continue along their own path and God will judge them accordingly.

Isaiah then gives us a description of what Jerusalem has become as the people have turned away from God.

The city that was once faithful to God's ways has become a harlot. Faithfulness and justice replaced by greed and debauchery; a place where murderers can feel safe. Their outward show of respectability has become a sham with their rulers and magistrates becoming corrupted and open to the highest bidder. No longer do they care for the less fortunate of society, the orphans and widows but leave them to fend for themselves as they build up their own empires and wealth.

Again God has run out of patience with them as they ignore His call to repentance and prophecies through Isaiah that He will purge the city of its dross and remove those who have succumbed to evil ways and replace them with judges and Counsellors as in the olden days when justice and righteousness reigned and once He has accomplished this Jerusalem will once more be known as the City of Righteousness , the Faithful City.

In the rest of the Book of Isaiah we see the prophet bringing the word of the Lord to the people both as conviction and as a comfort and encouragement. John last week brought us probably the most well known of the chapters in Isaiah, Isaiah 53 concerning the crucifixion and resurrection of Jesus but there are many other well known passages which I am sure other speakers will bring to us over the next few weeks.

But this introduction in chapter 1 shows us how God looks upon His people that He created and can sometimes despair at what He sees them doing and whilst always offering a way of redemption and reconciliation by turning back to His ways there is still consequences for those who do not choose to follow Him.

As we see the things which are going on in the world around us at the moment, hospitals with innocent civilians, women and children being deliberately targeted and bombed by their fellow countrymen, whole groups of hundreds of thousands of men, women and children being driven from their homes and their villages burnt down so they can't return, poisonous gas being indiscriminately discharged in areas with large numbers of children, Christian churches being blown up sometimes with their congregations inside them, to name a few, what must God be thinking about what we are doing to each other and to His world.

Is He reaching the point where even His patience will run out and His anger will be brought to bear on the world? Has He shed enough tears already for the atrocities we commit against one another and His creation?

I, obviously, don't have the answers to those questions. What I do know is that if I were God my patience would have run out a while ago and I would have done something. I don't know what because, thankfully I'm not God. But what I do know is that it makes our responsibility to reach out to those around us who don't know God yet even more urgent. They need to know, and we need to be telling them before as we're told in Acts 2:20 quoting from Joel:

"The Sun will be turned to darkness and the moon to blood before the coming of the great and glorious day of the Lord. And everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved."

By then it will be too late! Ask God to lay someone on your heart, family, friend or work or school colleague and that as you pray for them He will give you the right opportunity to speak His word into their lives.