

I was reading an article in the paper this week about men's health. I do it just for the comfort of knowing I'm doing everything wrong. In it was a lot about diet. I read it through for confirmation that my diet was good. It wasn't. But I did see that, as part of a balanced diet, I should eat flaxseed whatever that is.

Now as "man does not live by bread alone but on every word that comes from the mouth of God" (Matt 4:4) we recognise we also need a balanced diet spiritually so perhaps to go back into the Old Testament to Isaiah is the spiritual equivalent to eating flaxseed that is not on the face of it very appetising but good for us!

We look at Isaiah this year as we seek, in terms of making sure we are a balanced church, to grow in the up direction that is in our relationship with God. Isaiah has much to tell us about our God and his nature and we will think together about his holiness, wrath, faithfulness and justice along with other aspects of God's nature over the next weeks.

V1 provides us the context. Isaiah received a vision, that is God revealed himself, his will and his purpose to Isaiah, his messenger or prophet. God did this during the reign of these four kings which is roughly from 740-690BC. However, because the prophecy seems to cover a period up to about 500BC many scholars have suggested that it comes not from one man but from three. While there are good reasons for that and one cannot say with complete assurance that such suggestions are wrong I do believe that what we have here is an anthology of the prophecies of one man spoken over a span of 40 years.

Today we look at 1:1-20 and the King's Desire.

1. A sinful nation v2-9

I wonder what you think of when the word sin is mentioned? Is it wrong thoughts, or things we do or say that we know are not good? I think in these verses God through Isaiah shows us that sin is rebellion against God. Sin is when people refuse to allow God to be God, when they refuse to allow God his rightful place in their lives.

That's what we see here. Just look at it with me if you would.

In v2 God speaks of raising children who rebel against him.

Then v3 we read how, while even animals respond to their masters, God's people refuse to acknowledge their God.

Look at v4 God speaks of a nation, a people, a brood or seed and children, all terms used to describe God's own people but see how he describes them as sinful, guilty, evil and corrupt. Why is this, because they have spurned, forsaken and turned their backs on God.

That is they have rebelled. They were God's people in God's place as God had promised them through Abraham, but they had turned from him to worship and serve other Gods. That is sin where we in rebellion replace God with someone or something else.

As a result of this rebellion, as we can see from the next verses, rather than enjoy God's blessing they were experiencing God's judgement. In v7 we see something of what was going on at the time of Isaiah with this reference to the attacks of the Assyrian forces. Later on in 10:5 God refers to "Assyria, the rod of my anger, in whose hand is the club of my wrath".

Rebellion had brought God's wrath on God's people but, rather than see that and turn back to God, v5&6 despite all the pain, they had persisted in their rebellion.

From God's perspective it is as if they were banging their heads against a brick wall and hadn't the sense to stop.

So how do you view sin? What we are being shown here is:

a. it is rebellion against God's rule in our lives. That is it isn't just thinking something bad it is much more than that. The wrong thinking or speaking or acting stems from us thinking that we are God in our lives. Can you see that in your life? Can you see where you are sinning, that is refusing to allow God to be God?

b. God takes sin seriously. Here we see God depicted as the Holy one of Israel and we will see more of his holiness next week. But as a holy God he can have nothing to do with sin. So sin cuts people off from God and opens them to God's punishment. Friends God still sees sin as serious. Our sin cuts us off from him and ultimately if it is not dealt with we will meet with God's punishment.

c. But God still cares for this sinful nation and for every sinner. The question in v5 "why do you persist?" is a cry from the heart of a loving God and it was because of that he sent Isaiah to speak to the people.

2. The trampling of God's courts v10-15

Now we must not get the impression from this that God's people were not religious. In these next verses we have reference to sacrifices in v11, Sabbath observance in v13, festivals in v14 and prayer in v15. However God says he "takes no pleasure" in these. He "can't bear" them and even "hates" them. It was not the sacrifices God didn't like but the attitude of the people bring them. In v12 God describes it as "trampling of my courts".

Perhaps you have been in an art gallery or museum and quietly with others are looking at things and reflecting upon what you are seeing when suddenly a party of school children arrive. Now some may be interested but for many it will be simply a day out and they are there because they have been told to be here and at heart they have no real interest in what they are seeing. They are going through the motions. It is something like that which God is speaking of here. People who may be

bringing a sacrifice or there on the Sabbath or a Festival but their hearts are not engaged, they are going through the motions, trampling God's courts.

God's rejection of their religious activity is a result of sin. Their actions have no reality because there is no relationship. It will be Christmas soon! Just think about buying a present for someone you know well and then perhaps buying for someone you hardly know, a colleague at work or a nephew or niece you haven't seen for ages. The one will have some thought and care put in because of your relationship the other perhaps not. I hope you can see what I mean. These people were in their religious activity going through the motions. Perhaps others around them didn't see that but God did and God didn't like it. Their religion didn't cut any ice with God he saw them as meaningless. These actions certainly didn't remove the barrier of the sin of the people.

People have often said to me something along the lines of "I'm not really into religion". I think they imagine it will make me go away and tick them off the list as not interested. I usually reply, "no nor am I." From these words I could also add "and neither is God". God says, "I have no pleasure in" your sacrifices; "I cannot bear your" Sabbath assemblies; "my soul hates" your festivals; "I will not listen" to your prayers. God is not into religion he is into relationship and because his people, his children have turned away from him their sacrifices etc. have become acts of religion done according to rules not acts of love out of a relationship.

Friends you can come here every Sunday, sing your heart out, give your money, help in Lightcatchers and so on but if we imagine God will be impressed we are wrong. If we imagine these things will make God forgive us what we have done wrong, we are wrong.

If our hearts are not right with God then all we are doing with our religious activity is trampling God's courts.

3. Let's reason together v16-20

In v16-17 God calls for change, for them to stop doing wrong and make themselves clean.

V18 is the key verse, ""Come now let us reason together" says the Lord "Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow"".

God calls his people to him to reason with him, to debate with him. God is, as it were, calling the people to come and discuss with him the two options left to them in the light of their actions. Should they continue as they are and be destroyed or should they obey God and be blessed?

God offers them the opportunity for forgiveness for their sin and a new start. They can take it v19 and find blessing, God's people in God's place under God's blessing.

Or v20 they can continue to reject God and find judgement.

This is the message from Isaiah today. A holy God speaks to his rebellious and sinful people calling them to return to him while there is still time.

I hope in God's words in v18 we can see God's desire which is born out of God's faithful love for his people. The desire is to forgive his people and be reconciled to them.

Now having seen the nature of these rebellious people, how they have rejected God and persisted in their rebellion even when the forces of Assyria were battering them. So we have to ask why? Why did God desire his people to return to him?

The clue to the answer is in the terms God uses to describe them, v2 children, v3 Israel, my people, v4 a brood or seed, the reference to people who were the seed of Abraham. The words show us these people as God's chosen people with who God had made a covenant and while the people had reneged on that covenant God has not. They have proved faithless but God is faithful.

You know how it is you buy a car and something goes wrong and then you find out that that bit isn't covered by the warranty. Or you have a problem with the house and the insurers find every way not to pay out. Well this is the opposite. This is the insurers ringing you up to see if you have had an accident and what can they do!

God was speaking through Isaiah to a rebellious and faithless people and calling them to come back to him and find forgiveness and restoration as the people of God. This is God's desire and we see the same and more as we come into the New Testament we see the same desire on the part of God, "This is good and pleases God our Saviour, who wants all men to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth". (1 Tim 2:3&4)

This is the faithfulness of God who promised Abraham that he would gather his people together in his place under his blessing and he is still doing that. Our God is a God of salvation a salvation which stems out of his faithful commitment to his promise.

In the New Testament we see also the answer to the question how will God forgive.

God here called his people to come and reason with him. He wanted them to come back to him. As part of that return he promised that "Though your sins are like scarlet they shall be as white as snow; though they are as red as crimson they shall be like wool" (Isa 1:18).

However it is only as we come into the New Testament that we see how this was to be done. It was to be done through Jesus.

Jesus, who is God, came to earth and in his death on the cross took the penalty we deserved for our rebellion. With that penalty paid, the Holy God could justly look on us sinners and declare us forgiven and holy.

Paul sums this up well for us, "Once you were alienated from God and were enemies in your minds because of your evil behaviour. But now he has reconciled you by Christ's physical body through death to present you holy in his sight, without blemish and free from accusation" (Col 1:21-22)

In faithfulness God desired the return of rebellious humanity and in love he provided a way.

This is God's desire for humanity and it is God's desire for you and me.

A holy God calls to his rebellious and sinful people calling them to return to him while there is still time.

Today God says to you listening here in Christ Church and those who will listen on download, "Come now let us reason together.....Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow". His call is for us today to return to him while there is still time and the way is through Jesus.

How do you respond? You see no matter who we are and whether we are a Christian or not we all need to make the same response of recognising our rebellion and asking God the Father to forgive us through the death of Jesus his son.

God calls us to come and find forgiveness with the recognition for us as for those in the time of Isaiah that if we do we will find forgiveness and blessing (v19) but if we will not then we will face the wrath and judgement of God. These are the two ways to live spelt out by Isaiah and also in this little booklet. I'm happy to give you one at the end to clarify what we have been thinking about from Isaiah.

God's desire Isaiah tells us is that we who are sinful and cut off from a holy God would return and be restored. May God do that work in our hearts even today.

Let me pray for us the prayer at the back of the 2 ways to live booklet.

Dear God, I know that I am not worthy to be accepted by you. I don't deserve your gift of eternal life. I am guilty of rebelling against you and ignoring you. I need forgiveness. Thank you for sending your son to die for me that I may be forgiven. Thank you that he rose from the dead to give me new life. Please forgive me and change me that I may live with Jesus as my ruler. Amen.