

Let's wait.....it will come. I wonder what you have said that about? What have you waited for? A bus, the dentist, the end of term, retirement, Christmas, a hospital appointment one could go on. There are so many things we wait for. Some we know will eventually come but some well we just sort of hope might come. Heinrich Boll in his book the waiting Room writes "note the difference between waiting and awaiting. Waiting is the condition of a certain impatient hopelessness; awaiting is the expectant certainty: slack sails are filled with the intoxicating breath of hope."

Isaiah 56-66 can be seen as God speaking to his people at times of waiting. For the original hearers there was the waiting before they went into exile in Babylon. For those who took the scrolls of Isaiah's words into exile there was the waiting to return to Jerusalem. For those who returned there was the waiting for God's blessing on his people and for things to get better. For all there was the waiting for the promised Messiah to come.

We too, if we are followers of Jesus, are in a waiting time. We are in the time between his first and second coming and we await that return of Jesus. So these chapters have things to say to us as we await his return.

1 The certain promise

That is what we have in these verses. God promised to his people something better than they were experiencing. V17 "Behold I will create new heavens and a new earth". That describes a total newness. Everything will be made new. It is a picture of paradise.

There will be nothing there which prompts a recollection of what things used to be like, v17b.

There will be a new Jerusalem, that is a new city with a new people which fit God's perfect design.

In this place there will be contentment v13 as all we need is provided; there will only be joy v18b&19; there will be fullness of life as the rule of death is removed v20; there will be total security v21-23 and there will be peace v25.

All the things which God's people in the period covered by Isaiah's prophecy lacked would be theirs in God's eternal kingdom. They would at last be God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing as he had intended when he created the world in the first place and as he promised to Abraham.

This was the vision given to Isaiah to bring to the people to encourage them as they waited.

It is the vision also given to us and repeated to us in Rev 21&22 in greater fullness where John "saw a new heaven and a new earth for the first heaven and the first earth had passed away and there was no longer any sea. I saw the holy city the new Jerusalem coming down out of heaven from God..." Rev 21:1&2.

I have been reading over the last couple of weeks a book entitled, 'The way of the righteous in the muck of life'. It is a book about Psalms 1-12 but it is the title I love because often that is life – it is messy. It was back in May when we thought from Isaiah 35 of God's promise that he would provide a way, a way of holiness that would bring us back to Zion. That way we noted was a way of rejoicing, "and the ransomed of the Lord will return. They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads." (Isaiah 35:10). However, often entering heaven seems a long way off and walking on the way of holiness is hard and life isn't always good. It is for those reasons because we are often in 'the muck of life' that God gives us this vision so that we do continue walking on the way and we do it positively and with joy.

There has been a lot in the news this week about the transport strike in London. I well remember a Saturday afternoon and there I was trapped in a tube train as it made its way along the Metropolitan line. It was crowded. Even worse than the rush hour and yet this was Saturday afternoon. It was very hot as we stood there back to back face to face knee to knee. It was uncomfortable and even painful and yet as I looked round that train the vast majority of people were smiling, laughing, even singing. What was it? Yes it was a Saturday in May 1984 and most of Watford was headed for Wembley and the F.A.CUP final. So with the sense of expectation and excitement the uncomfortable and painful nature of the journey was forgotten. Except for those who didn't know it was cup final day. But you see the point, the goal made the journey not only bearable but joyful.

2 But how can this be?

How is it that God can promise a new heaven and earth and "take delight in my people"?

At the beginning of this section of Isaiah God's verdict on the leaders of his people was stark, "Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge; they are all mute dogs, they cannot bark; they lie around and dream, they love to sleep. They are dogs with mighty appetites; they never have enough. They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, they seek their own gain." (Isaiah 56:10-11) The watchmen and shepherds had failed and so, as we see in Chap 57, God's people had turned to idolatry and God described them as "a brood of rebels and the offspring of liars" (57:4).

How is it that God can think that he will "take delight in my people" in the new heaven?

In the opening section of the book we see the promised King, the one coming from the stump of Jesse. Then in the second section we see the Servant of the Lord through whose suffering God's eternal plan of redemption is accomplished and here we see the anointed conqueror.

What God's people would and could not do God did and what God's people did not deserve God gave to them. "He saw that there was no one, he was appalled that there was no one to intervene; so his own arm achieved salvation for him," (59:16).

The promise is that, through his own servant, God would bring salvation to his own people and it is that which brings the transformation as we see in 60:2 "See darkness covers the earth and thick darkness is over the peoples but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you." In so doing God's people would become what God had intended them to be a blessing to all nations, "Nations will come to your light and kings to the brightness of your dawn" (60:3).

It is God who will provide salvation but not to all people, "I will not destroy them all. I will bring forth descendants from Jacob and from Judah those who will possess my mountains; my chosen people will inherit them and here will my servants live." (65:8-9).

God was speaking of a remnant of his people whom God himself would restore and who would live faithfully in God's land and through whom God's light and glory would spread to all nations.

This is what we were seeing in the first of this series in Isaiah 1 that God wanted his people in his place under his rule and blessing but that would only happen through God's own action.

The picture here of the new heavens and earth with God's people in is the same idea, God's people in God's place under God's rule and blessing.

This is heaven and God wants us there but not everyone will be there, for the emphasis in the early part of Isaiah 65 is on the expression "my servants" (cf v13&14). That refers to those who are trusting in God and what he has done to save and restore his people.

Friends this is the heart of our Christian faith. God has a place for us in heaven. Jesus made that clear when he told his disciples that there was room for them in his Father's house and he was going to prepare a place for them (John 14:2-3). But our way there, as we saw when we looked at Isaiah 35, is through Jesus and only Jesus, who said "I am the way no one comes to the Father except through me" (John 14:6).

In the new heavens and new earth that God promises there will be his people who will delight him but only through Jesus. However all this is yet to come. Now we have to wait

3. How do we live while we wait?

So what do you do while you are waiting? Say you have managed to procure that most elusive of treasures, an appointment with a doctor and you are there in the waiting room. How do you wait? Are you pacing around and checking your watch every minute? Or do you sit relaxed reading your book yet alert for the call?

The point of this prophecy to God's people was to provide them with a

a. confident expectation of God's new world into which he would gather his faithful people. All the way through the timespan of Isaiah God's people were struggling and the message at different times of return to Jerusalem and here of this new creation was to encourage God's people. The message was it is going to happen so hang on in there. But the message was not just it might happen, or

wouldn't it be nice if it did happen, but it will happen - confident expectation to encourage the people of God to keep on trusting as they wait for God's promises to be fulfilled. We know that the earlier promises of God in Isaiah were fulfilled and that should help our confident expectation as we await the return of Jesus.

One writer puts it like this, "It is our privilege to look back through the lens of the cross and see the detailed outworking of prophecies that, for Isaiah, lay far in the future, and to recognise the amazing accuracy of the divine predictions and the inevitability of their enactment....In the light of what has already been predicted and fulfilled, we can surely have every confidence that all which is yet to be fulfilled will be accomplished and so we are heartened to persevere faithfully in the waiting time." We are waiting but in the certain hope that Jesus will return and there will then be a new heaven and a new earth. It is not like waiting for Christmas because we don't know the date, more like waiting for a friend to arrive, we know they will come we are just not sure when.

As God's remnant were waiting God was looking for them to be living in

b. obedience. It was their disobedience and idolatry which had got them into the mess that is graphically described in Isaiah, firstly the threat of the Assyrian forces and finally to see Jerusalem destroyed and many of the people taken into captivity. Similarly for us it is our disobedience which cuts us off from God. God's people are called to be a holy people and as we wait for that day when Christ will come we are to be that through obedience to the will and word of God.

I'm sure like me you have driven on a twisty-turny narrow road and been worried about going off the road and the disaster that would happen if you do. We regularly pray "forgive us our trespasses". To trespass is to go off the road, off the way of holiness that God has made for us and put us on. That way is disaster!

So let me encourage us all as we await the return of Jesus to reflect upon our lives and ask am I living the holy and obedient godly life God would have me lead or are there things I need to turn away from that I may continue to walk on the way of holiness?

The promise to the remnant of God's people was that as they lived in holiness as God's people in God's place under God's rule so they would fulfil God's purpose for the world in bringing his light to the nations. In this way we see how "a trusting redeemed servant Israel becomes the messenger with clean lips through whom the world can find its Saviour". In the light of this as we wait we should be

c. witnessing to our faith in God. This has always been God's purpose for his people that we should be his witness in the world and bring his light to all people. Our witness in word and action not only draws others to Jesus but it speeds his return, "You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God and speed its coming" (2 Peter 3:11-12).

Our witness should be that 'Christ is surely coming' and our encouragement should be so get ready that is make sure you know Christ as Saviour before the day when he returns as judge.

As we were preparing for the discover mission we encouraged each other to be thinking and praying about our contact people. The people we know the people we meet with whom we might be able to share something of our faith. If we are to grow as a church and fulfil our aim to have 250 members by the end of 2018 then we all need to be doing that. If each adult member over the next three years helped one person to faith and to membership here then we would easily complete that aim. But more we do not want to think that friends of family will not be ready on that day when Jesus will and I say will not might return.

So many of the promises of God in Isaiah came true. They happened. Those that have not will in God's time. There will be a day when Christ Jesus returns not as the suffering Servant of Isaiah 53 but as the anointed conqueror of Isaiah 63:1, "Who is this, robed in splendour, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? "It is I, speaking in righteousness, mighty to save."

As we wait that day let us keep alive in our hearts and minds that confident expectation that this will happen as God said. Let us live godly and obedient lives and let us share our faith with others.