

As someone who reads a lot I love it when you get close to the end of a book and can't wait to read the final chapters and see how it ends, who did it or whatever.

Today we come to the end of our series in Isaiah and we look at the last few verses of the last chapter.

So how does it end? Well Isaiah 66:22 speaks of the new heavens and new earth, which we looked at last week and the focus of the new heavens as we saw last week and see here in v20 is the new Jerusalem. That is how the book ends with a new city.

The book of Isaiah has been called a tale of two cities. In Isaiah 1:21 we see the failed Jerusalem, "See how the faithful city has become a harlot" and then the promise of a city restored, "Zion will be redeemed with justice, her penitent ones with righteousness" (1:27).

Now at the end in Chaps 65 & 66 we see the promise of the new Jerusalem which again last week we saw is echoed in Revelation 21&22. We saw how God's people would be transformed from a "brood of rebels" (57:4) to a people in whom God delights (65:19).

Today we see more of this new city and how God is at work to populate it with his people in whom he delights.

### **1. God's aim v18**

The first part of the verse is uncertain but the point of the verse is clear as God says to his people through Isaiah that the time is coming when he will gather people from every nation, tribe and language and they will come to him in this new city, in heaven. This is the King's mission. As Isaiah saw it, it was still in the future for us it is in part come true.

When Jesus came, as the Messiah longed for and expected by Isaiah, he brought with him the kingdom of God. He proclaimed "The kingdom of God is near" (Mark 1:15). By near he meant it was already happening. What we see through Jesus' life and in the immediate time after his life is this prophecy beginning to come true. On the day of Pentecost the Parthians, Medes, Elamites, Egyptians, visitors from Rome, Cretans and Arabs all heard the gospel message. The worldwide church of Jesus Christ had begun. As we meet here in Christ Church we see that in microcosm as people from so many nations come together to worship.

In heaven we will join with in the "great multitude that no one could number from every nation, tribe, people and language before the throne and in front of the lamb" (Rev 7:9).

This is our God's aim. Our God is a missionary God. His heart is a salvation heart. We see this in 1 Tim 2:3&4, "This is good and pleases God our Saviour who wants all people to be saved and to come to a knowledge of the truth."

This was what Isaiah saw would happen, v12 there would be those who would be flooded with the peace of God and restored to God as their rightful parent. However there would also, v14-17 be those who through their persistent rebellion against God will face his wrath and judgement. God desires all to be saved but not all will accept his salvation.

Our God is a missionary God seeking to save and restore those who are lost and in rebellion against him. He has a heart for salvation. I wonder about us. Do we share God's heart and long for the salvation of those around us?

## **2. God's sign v19**

God's aim was to gather all peoples to him but how would he do that? The answer is there for us in v19 in two parts. The first is there at the start of the verse, "I will set a sign among them".

We are all familiar with people using signs to attract our attention and to direct us to where they want us to go. A few weeks ago a group of us men went for a Sunday evening walk. We started outside a pub and the aim was to wander in a circle back to the pub. When we got back I saw a sign outside the pub which said "beer this way" with an arrow pointing to my left and "no beer that way" with an arrow pointing to the right. In that instance the sign wasn't really needed because the pub was obvious and was drawing us in!

Here the sign is meant to be a statement of God's salvation and to draw people to God. In the short term as Isaiah spoke these words the return to Jerusalem from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the city was that sign of God at work. However, as the context here for Isaiah is the far distant future surely we have to see that the sign is the cross of Jesus. The sign which stands over and in every Christian community draws people from every nation. The cross changes rebels into people in whom God delights and creates a family of God's people from men and women of such different roots, backgrounds and experiences.

God spoke through Isaiah of this sign which would draw people to him. Jesus also spoke of the sign in John 12:32&33, "And I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all people to myself." He said this to show the kind of death he was going to die."

The sign is the sign of God in action to redeem his people. As we saw last week what people could not do God announced he would do through his promised Messiah.

The sign of the cross would be, from Isaiah's perspective, and has been from ours, the rallying call to people down the ages attracting and drawing people to God. As the cross is explained to people so by the power and grace of God it changes their hearts and minds and brings people into the kingdom of God.

On this day, when later on we will celebrate with five of our friends as they are baptised, we can see the continuing power of the cross in people's lives. It was for me key in coming to faith as it has been for countless millions over the years.

But it may be that some here or listening to this on download are still unmoved by the sign of the cross. If that is you let me encourage you to take time to think, talk and reflect on the death of Jesus for you that God may do his work in your life, flood you with his peace and restore you as his child.

### **3. God's mission v19**

In the second bit of the verse we see the second part of how God the King fulfils his mission and that is through his redeemed people, which for us means the church. "will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations."

The King's mission will be and is being worked out through his people sent out by God to every corner of the earth to proclaim his glory. The great commission is not just there in Matt 28 it is here in Isaiah 66. God says I am a sending God and I send my people out to proclaim my glory.

The other day my wife Ruth said to me "will you go to Tesco?" Fine no problem and I was given a list of things to get. Still no problem. Then she said, "while you are there can you take these tomatoes back which I bought a couple of days ago but some of them were rotten." Ah now that is a bit more difficult. I don't like taking things back. I don't like complaining about things. This was out of my comfort zone!" So I asked, "can't you do that? You are so much better at it than me!"

As we read the Bible and hear God speak to us about many things, prayer, love, compassion, holiness and so on we may think "yes that's OK. I'm happy to pray, to show love to others and so on." However as we hear these words about God's people being sent out to proclaim his glory and as we read those words of Jesus in Matt 28:19 "go and make disciples of all nations" well we often feel less happy. That is for many of us outside our comfort zone and so our tendency is to say, "I will let someone else do that they are better at it than me."

Friends this is God's word about all of us and to all of us. We are all called to be witnesses to God, to his glory and his grace.

We are all called to be part of the King's mission. So are we doing that? Do you have people who God has placed on your heart to pray for and seek to share your faith with?

I hope you do I hope you have people for whom you are praying regularly. That is the first and most important step.

Vijay Menon came to faith from Hinduism in just one hour. The key to it was prayer but Vijay didn't know who "Then one day it came out. Vijay had written an article for a Christian magazine entitled

"why I am no longer a Hindu," Two praying people opened that magazine and had the shock of their lives. They had never met Vijay but had heard his name years earlier. An elderly lady had confided in them "I'm not very good at witnessing for my faith," she told them "and I'm hopeless at arguing with non-believers. But I've been praying for a young lodger of mine from India. He's a Hindu, his name is Vijay Menon. Would you join me in praying that he will come to know Christ?" They agreed and a prayer triplet was formed. Prayer continued steadily until the landlady became ill and died. That left two of the triplet. Although they had never seen Vijay they agreed to keep up the praying. In all their prayers continued for 7 years. Then came the day they opened up the magazine. Prayer did the work, then when the gospel was presented it was only a matter of minutes and a life was changed forever.

The King's mission is centred on the sign the cross but it is worked out by his people.

You don't know Doug Barnett but you should be thankful to him. He was the man who explained the cross to me and through whom I came to faith. Yes he was gifted but he is just an ordinary guy. We are ordinary people but called and gifted by God to proclaim his gospel. As the hymn says "we have a gospel to proclaim!" We can be confident in that gospel because as Paul reminds us, "it is the power of God for the salvation of everyone who believes." (Romans 1:16)

So in the light of this friends let me give you a little challenge. On Sunday 20<sup>th</sup> December at 6pm we will have our Carol service. Many people even if they don't come to church often like carols and Carol Services. Now I hope you will be there but then let me ask who might you invite to join you at that service? This is the challenge, to see if you can bring someone to that service. Why not start now by praying for that person. Perhaps invite them to something along the way a men's breakfast, Coffee and Co or some other event.

In the end I went to Tesco and took the tomatoes back and it was OK no problem. Over the years I have summoned up the nerve to invite a number of people to different events. Some have come and some have not but never has anyone been anything other than polite in response. So give it a try. We are all if we are followers of Jesus part of the King's mission being sent out to proclaim his glory and grace.

#### **4. God's assurance v20**

A friend told me recently of a dreadful experience he had had. He was due to fly out from Heathrow to a business meeting in Europe. He'd had a taxi to the airport. Then because it was only a short trip had not handed in luggage but simply went through security. He waited at the appropriate gate and it was only when about to board that the flight attendant noticed he had got his wife's passport! He was not allowed on the flight and had the ignominy of having to be escorted back to the main part of

the airport and then, because it was too late to get another flight that day, ring someone to come and pick him up.

God spoke about sending out to all the nations but the question is will those who respond be acceptable to God? Is there the chance that is we recognise the sign of the cross or hear the gospel message and come to God that at the last moment he will say sorry you can't come in to heaven you don't as it were have the right passport?

The answer is no there is no chance of that.

As we look at v20 we see those who come in from the nations described as "brothers" that is part of the family. These people were not fellow Jews but people of faith who we see are brought as a "grain offering" that is as an offering acceptable to God.

All those who are reached with the proclamation of God's glory and are drawn in by the sign of the cross will be accepted by the holy God. That includes you and I and it includes your contact people and mine.

Jesus and his cross is as it were our passport into the kingdom of God and Jesus makes it clear that this passport will not be rejected, "All that the Father gives me will come to me, and whoever comes to me I will never drive away." (John 6:37)

This the King's assurance to us for ourselves and as we seek to share our faith through others that the way into God's kingdom is certain if we come through the cross in response to the gospel.

So, as we draw stumps on Isaiah, we have seen so much about our God to enable and encourage us as we seek to grow in our relationship with him.

We have seen he is a holy and majestic God who acts in judgement on those who rebel against him and who ignore his will for their lives. But we have also seen his desire that his wayward and sinful people should return to him. He has sent his servant to make that possible through his suffering. He calls all to come and find comfort in his presence, to share in his banquet spread for us in his eternal city the new Jerusalem and to that end he has established a way of holiness along which we may travel as we make our journey with God towards the new heaven and earth.

This is our God. He is the holy one and when we see him high and exalted then we will recognise our sinful nature and come back to him through the cross and walk the way of holiness drawing others onto that way until through Jesus our passport we enter eternity.