

Today we are looking at the prophet Isaiah. You may be aware that at the 10.30 All Age Worship service we are engaged in 'P Factor', the battle of the prophets to see who is the greatest of five prophets. Last Sunday we looked at the call of those five prophets, Elijah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Jonah and Daniel and today we look at their message, next week the opposition they went through and finally the fulfilment of their message in Jesus.

What we will do here at 9am is just consider one prophet each week. So today we look at the message of Isaiah. Next week we'll look at the opposition Elijah experienced and the week after at the fulfilment of Jonah's prophecy in the life of Jesus.

Isaiah is one of the great eighth century prophets. His call to be a prophet, which is recorded for us in Chap 6, was probably around 740BC and he continued to speak the word of God to the people until around 701BC. That covers the span of Kings of Judah, the southern part of Israel, listed for us in v1. 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.

Central to the message of Isaiah is that God is holy and his holiness fills the earth. His holiness is the only quality in the O.T. which has to be cubed to adequately express it, "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty" (Isa 6:3). This Holy God has committed himself to his people so that he is often described by Isaiah as the holy one of Israel. He belongs to them and they to him. However, the people have turned away from their God seeking other gods and trying to find strength through alliances with other nations. So God spoke to his people through Isaiah to show the people of Jerusalem and Judah that to trust in human power as exemplified by the nations was foolishness whereas to trust in God was wisdom. God's punishment for their faithlessness Isaiah says will be worked out against his people through the Assyrians but that will not be the end of the story for God will restore his people and that rather than them going to the nations for strength and support the nations will come to Judah and specifically to Zion (60.1). So that's the prophecy of Isaiah in a nutshell you can now go to sleep for the next twenty minutes while I unpack some of it using Isaiah 1:1-20

1. rebellion

The history of the world is full of rebellions and revolutions. One of the least successful was a fascist coup organised in Rome in 1964. Gathering on the outskirts of the city the right wingers planned a stampede to the centre prior to overthrowing the government. However, the majority were not from Rome itself and so the bulk of the stampede got lost in the back streets. Five years after the coup the authorities discovered it had happened and set up a commission to investigate.

Rebellion is not uncommon. The rebellion of humanity against God is the message of the first chapter, a constant message through the book and is there in the other prophets as well, Elijah speaking to Obadiah who was in charge of Ahab's palace said, "You have abandoned the Lord's commands and have followed the Baals" (1 Kings 18:18). God's complaint through Jeremiah was that, "the leaders rebelled against me. The prophets prophesied by Baal" (Jer 2:8).

Here their rebellion is described in graphic terms in that they had, v4 forsaken the Lord, spurned him and turned their backs on him. This was God's message to his people – they had forsaken God. They were his children, that is God had chosen them, had given them life and had in love provided for them. As their creator and God he looked for them to honour him and live in a way that pleased him and strengthened their relationship with him. But instead they had rebelled. That means they had refused to accept his authority and rule in their lives and that had been shown specifically in that they had turned to other gods.

They had forsaken the God who had made and saved them.

It is not uncommon and we see it on a much more general level in life especially in families where parents are set against children and vice versa. Just this week Henry Allingham the WW1 veteran and oldest man was laid to rest. At the funeral was Betty Hankin, the daughter who had not spoken to Henry for nearly 40 years. So long had their estrangement been that Henry used to say that he thought she was dead. If we can begin to understand something of the pain of such an estrangement perhaps we can hear the pain in the voice of God as he says, "you have forsaken me."

2. Political Disaster

The result of their turning from God and flouting his will was disaster.

As we look at vs 5-9 we see a pretty bleak picture.

While vs 5&6 use the picture of a body it is actually the nation as a whole the God is speaking about. The nation has been battered about and as we see from v7 invading armies have been looting the country to such an extent that from v9 if God had not restrained them then the whole nation would have been destroyed.

The repeated message through Isaiah and through many of the other prophets is that God alone can protect his people and yet they so often trusted in other means and so often in political alliances with other nations. We see this in Isaiah 30:1&2, "'Woe to the obstinate children," declares the LORD, "to those who carry out plans that are not mine, forming an alliance, but not by my Spirit, heaping sin upon sin; who go down to Egypt without consulting me; who look for help to Pharaoh's protection, to Egypt's shade for refuge." And in Jeremiah 2:17-18, "Have you not brought this on yourselves by forsaking the LORD your God when he led you in the way? Now why go to Egypt to drink water from the Shihor? And why go to Assyria to drink water from the River?" In making these alliances they turned their back on God and opened themselves to disaster when these alliances proved fragile.

3. Religious disaster

But it was not just the nation's physical well being that suffered from their rebellion but their spiritual well being also. This is dramatically shown in vs 10-17. In case the people might think "well even if things are bad we still have our religion and the Temple", God's message through the prophet demolished that hope.

Just look at what God said to them:

V13, "Stop bringing meaningless offerings! Your incense is detestable to me."

V13, "I cannot bear your evil assemblies."

V15, “even if you offer many prayers, I will not listen.”

What a terrible situation where God is shut off from his people because of their sin, which had created an unholy alliance of religious duty and personal iniquity. God spoke of his hatred of their forms of religion not because the forms were wrong but because they were empty without the personal holiness of the people. You know how you hate it when the children have been fighting and you separate them and tell them to say sorry and they say "Sorry" but with such venom and snarled lips that you know they don't mean it. The people were going through their ritual but God knew their hearts were not in it for in their hearts they had turned from him. Their religion was a sham an empty ritual and God knew it. It was into this situation that God spoke through Isaiah to call his people back to himself

4. The call of God

That call is there in v18.

The red stands as their guilt and God offers to work with his people to remove the stain of their sin and more just as snow and wool are by nature white he offers to deal with the nature from which sin stems.

God doesn't say here how that is to be done. Clearly if we look at the preceding verses there were things that God called them to do. 1. Wash (v16), that is they were to remove all uncleanness from their lives. 2. Stop (v16), a decisive abandonment of the old life. 3. Learn (v17), the development of a new mind and 4. Seek (v17), the setting of new objectives that conform to God's. This is repentance as defined here. Removing that which separated them from God, ceasing the wrong attitudes and actions they had been involved in, developing new attitudes and putting them into practice.

This of course is only one part of the matter because even if they did all this the holiness of God stood against them which is why later in the prophecy they needed to hear the message centred on the servant of God, the one who, “was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities; the punishment that brought us peace was upon him” (Isaiah 53:5).

Here ultimately is how their sin and our sin is to be dealt with and resolved, through the one sacrifice of Jesus, the act of grace received by faith. This was God's offer of grace to his rebellious people but note

5. the threat of judgement

God's offer to them was serious. It was a case of return to God or v20 they would be destroyed.

This is the message of Isaiah in these verses the call of a holy God to a rebellious people to return to him in repentance and find his favour once more or, if they would not turn, to recognise they would be destroyed.

Friends I hope I don't have to spell out too much just how this speaks to us. We may claim to be followers of Jesus and we may call him Saviour and Lord and yet it is easy to be in a situation where we are continuing in sin, where we are being rebellious knowing that our lives are not what God wants but doing nothing about it. I love the story from a church in the West Indies where a preacher was well aware of the prevalent sin of chicken stealing alongside other moral weaknesses in his congregation. He found that whenever such things were mentioned in the sermon a kind of coldness came over the congregation. Eventually he found out exactly how unwelcome his message was when a leading lay person told him, “this congregation does not like sermons on chicken stealing and hopes that for the future you will keep to the gospel.” (SIN 1)

As a result of our sinfulness we may recognise when we come to worship that actually we are going through the motions, that there is a gap between our words and our lives.

Friends if that is the case then this call of God here is the call of God here is to repent and return and his grace towards us stands sure.

God's will for us is that we should be holy. Isaiah knew this and experienced it in that great vision in the temple when the only way the holiness of God drove him to his knees in repentance. God wanted his people then and now to be holy. We see that in 1 Thess 4:3, “It is God's will that you should be sanctified,” that is made holy.

The start of that is to take a very good look at our lives to see where we have gone wrong, where we have forsaken God and are being sinful.

Many years back I read the Chronicles of Thomas Covenant the Unbeliever – a trilogy something along the lines of Lord of the Rings. It centred round the man Thomas Covenant who kept being transported to a totally different world called 'The Land'. Thomas Covenant suffered from leprosy which destroys the nerve endings and so the pain which would normally warn you of a cut finger never arrived for him. So regularly he had to carry out what he called his visual check to ensure he had not damaged himself without realising it. Not to do so would put the whole of his body at risk.

Continual sin deadens us and deadens our conscience and puts us at risk spiritually. We need regularly with the help of God to check our lives.

Our regular prayer should be as the Psalmist put it, “Search me, O God, and know my heart; test me and know my anxious thoughts. See if there is any offensive way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting.” (Psalm 139:23-24)

Just as my Mum used to check me over before I went out, straightening my clothes, patting down my hair, so we need to open our lives to the gaze of God and see the sin.

The next step is to repent and ask God's forgiveness. We can do that through Jesus and through him our sin though it is very much like scarlet can be washed clean and we can be restored as God's children. As Paul put it in Col 1:22-23, “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— if you continue in your faith, established and firm.”

Friends what God would say to us through Isaiah and indeed through the consistent message of the prophets is to examine ourselves and see if there is any sin in us and if so to repent and find his forgiveness.