

## The Book of the Prophet Isaiah

Isaiah's place at the head of the prophetic books of the Old Testament is well deserved. There is nothing to equal his tremendous vision of God and the glory in store for God's people if they follow that vision in faith. Other prophets came before him historically but there are none greater. His writing has a beauty and sincerity unmatched in the Old Testament. He lived in Jerusalem during the 8th Century and was thought to have been about eighty when he died. In chapter 6 of his book he describes how he, an ordinary and perhaps not particularly good man, was called by God. This vision of God in his temple coloured the whole of Isaiah's missionary life. He had seen God as the 'Holy One of Israel' and he never forgot it. So let's begin there!

'Woe to me', I cried. 'I am ruined. For I am man of unclean lips and I live among a people of unclean lips and I have I have seen the King, the Lord Almighty'. Then one of the seraphs flew to me with a live coal in his hand, which he had taken from the altar. With it he touched my mouth and said. 'See, this has touched your lips, your guilt is taken away and your sins atoned for'. Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? And who will go for us? And I said 'Here am I, send me!' - Words that continue to resonate with us now and are used in our services of ordination and commissioning.

In our world of today the words 'prophecy' and 'prophesying' imply foretelling the future, and are often seen in a rather derisory light. But the Old Testament prophets made many accurate predictions, certainly about the coming of God's son, Jesus Christ. Chapter 9 of Isaiah gives us one such prophecy about that and we use the passage every Christmastide, both in word and song. 'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light....For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given and the government shall be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'.

But the heart of the prophets' message was about the present, not the future. Their task was to call the nation of Israel back to God's ways and to regain their faith in him alone. So If we want to understand what Isaiah's great prophetic book truly means, and apply that meaning to our world of today, we need to know a little of the people to whom they were first spoken and why. However Isaiah's prophecies had more than one audience because his book covers a long time-span, Isaiah's time as a prophet covered more than sixty years.

Thus we are seeing the people of Israel in three stages of their history, each related to one great disaster, when the Babylonians captured and destroyed Jerusalem and took most of the people into exile. The first of Isaiah's prophecies, chapters 1-39, were addressed to the people of Jerusalem some years before the city fell. In chapters 40-55 we find the prophecies addressed to the people in exile in Babylon. Then last come the prophecies addressed to those Israelites who had returned to Jerusalem to rebuild the temple and the city, chapters 56-66.

Before Jerusalem fell the people were confident that God would never allow their city or their land to be destroyed. Jerusalem was after all God's city how could it possibly be overthrown? Isaiah challenged this thinking. The city was full of wickedness, its people exploited the weak and the poor were downtrodden. (1: 21-23). They imagined that making sacrifices could turn away God's anger without any sincere repentance. Isaiah warned them that God would use foreign nations to come and destroy their city. Well, yes, God had made a covenant with King David, God had said that the line of kings from then would not fail and that he would protect the land. But the people had conveniently forgotten that the covenant came with conditions - 'If your sons keep my covenant!' Isaiah saw only two possibilities. The King and people could indeed 'keep the covenant', put their trust in God again and be blessed, or they could fail to trust him and find judgement rather than salvation. In the end they chose the latter course and destruction came at the hands of the Babylonians in 587BC. This message sounds a sombre warning to us today. God is still the Holy and Almighty One. If we imagine that we can say we believe in him, but do what we like with no thought to others and do not respond to him in faith, then we have got things very wrong. God requires us to keep his commandments or why should we expect a better fate than that which befell the Israelites?

And indeed during the exile in Babylon the Israelites had some difficult questions to ask themselves about why this disaster had happened. Was it because Babylon's god had defeated Yahweh, The Lord, the God of Israel? Had God been unfaithful to his promises? Had he rejected his people? Isaiah's prophecies in chapters 40 to 55 give us the answers to these questions. Had the Lord been defeated, no, absolutely not. He was the creator of the heavens and the earth, he alone could and would bring about reconciliation, he was always ready to forgive if his people returned to him in faith, and his promises were never broken.

It's worth hearing again some of the wonderful and majestic words from chapter 40, which speak of God's forgiveness to Israel. 'Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her that her hard service has been completed, that her sin has been paid for, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins.....Make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God. Every valley shall be raised up and every mountain and hill made low.....The glory of the Lord will be revealed and all mankind will see it. For the mouth of the Lord has spoken'. And finally - 'Do you not know, have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth, he will not grow tired or weary....He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak....those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength, they will soar on wings like eagles, they will run and not grow weary, they will walk and not be faint'.

Isaiah's words and the whole message of these chapters should encourage us still today. God is the greatest power in the universe and we know he keeps his promises, his Son Jesus Christ was sent to us and told us that. God is always ready to forgive, if we are ready to admit to our sinfulness and change.

Isaiah's prophecies to Israel after the exile came to a people faced with an enormous task. They had to change if they were to rebuild not just a city and the temple, but a whole community of faith. The prophecies in these last chapters aim to encourage those daunted by this task with the hope of a bright future. 'Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord rises upon you'. That's the beginning of chapter 60, full of the promise of restoration. So why then was this restoration such a long time in coming? Chapters 58 and 59 give us an explanation. God would not answer the Israelites prayers or respond to their fasting because they had still had not stopped sinning. They still exploited their workers and the weak were downtrodden. The Israelites future depended, as it had before the exile, on their response to God. If they responded in faith by keeping God's laws and protecting the weak, then God would save them.

These last chapters of Isaiah still speak to us today. God wants to establish his Kingdom here on earth. Jesus himself taught us that in his family prayer - 'Our Father who art in heaven, hallowed be thy name, thy Kingdom come, thy will be done, on earth as it is in heaven'.

Why are our prayers not always answered? Why do we so often find ourselves spiritually powerless? Is it because we too are disobedient? we too do not keep God's commandments? Jesus chose to use Isaiah's words from chapter 61 (Luke 4:17-21) when he was asked to read in the synagogue. He chose them very carefully and the words tells us exactly what we should be doing, this is all about preaching and delivering the 'good news'.

'The Spirit of the sovereign Lord is upon me because the Lord has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives, and release from darkness for prisoners. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of our God to comfort all who mourn and provide for those who grieve... to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair'. Jesus said that in him this prophecy had been fulfilled. They are words that still ring true today and we are the ones who must carry them in our lives and into everything we do.

As Christians we are called to be God's servants and we ought to recognise God's holiness and our sinfulness. Before we can serve God properly we need to accept that we too must change and accept his forgiveness, which was shown through Isaiah's prophecies and eventually in the coming of Christ. Then, like Isaiah, we must volunteer to serve God and keep his commandments. He is the one true God, but also our Father in Heaven, our Master and our Friend. We may not be prophets but we are all a vital part of God's church today, called to work together with him to make his wonderful and life changing message known in all the world.

Amen.