

## Sermon at St John's evensong on Sunday 25<sup>th</sup> August 2019

*May the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be always acceptable in thy sight, O Lord our strength and our redeemer*

*Amen*

Some words which conclude our OT reading, Isaiah 30:

‘Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see [him]. And when you turn to the right or to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, “This is the way; walk in it.”’

Isaiah 30 is, in many ways, a microcosm of the whole message of the prophet, and indeed of the wider prophetic literature in the Old Testament, more generally. For it combines, in a few verses and with remarkable poetic language, both prophetic judgement on a people who have gone astray, and at the same time – in marked contrast - words of hope and reassurance. ‘Thought the Lord may give you the bread of adversity’, and make no mistake, the prophet is very clear that the people have brought adversity on themselves by turning from the Lord’s ways... yet they shall again see the Lord and hear his word, saying to them ‘This is the way; walk in it.’

And if the closing words of tonight’s OT reading illustrate the contrast – between judgement and hope – in one way, there is another portion of the text which does it even more brilliantly. And that is the juxtaposing of words about ‘returning and rest’, with the reality that, so often, the people do precisely the opposite, and ‘flee upon their horses’; in other words whereas deep peace is offered to them by the Lord, they choose to run away as fast as possible in the opposite direction. And let me quote the section on ‘returning and rest’ in full, because it is such beautiful and profound passage, often associated with the Office of Compline or Night Prayer:

‘For thus says the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel: In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and rest shall be your strength.’ [and a little later, in verse 18] ‘the Lord waits to be gracious to you... blessed are all those who wait for him.’

The Lord indeed offers us salvation and gracious blessing, but so often, like the people to whom Isaiah wrote, we ‘ride upon swift steeds’, turning away from God’s presence, and as a result our pursuers are swift, and we risk all kinds of pressures and temptations that may come onto our path.

So Isaiah the prophet, both in tonight’s reading and more generally, uniquely combines prophesy with hope, judgement with assurance, searing social criticism with the promise of a peaceable

kingdom: one that will ultimately be fulfilled in the 'shoot that shall come out from the stock of Jesse': our messiah and Lord, Jesus Christ.

How interesting and relevant, then, to notice – in Isaiah's inspired vocabulary – how the people of God, naturally, tend to close their eyes and their ears to the way of the Lord, to what is right and good; choosing instead (for themselves) the way of destruction and evil. Verses 8-12 are full of insights into how this happens, and how we so often (imitating the wider society) fail to hear what God is saying:

'Go now, write it on a tablet... For they are a rebellious people faithless children who will not hear the instruction of the Lord; who say to the seers, "Do not see" and to the prophets "Do not prophecy to us what is right; speak to us smooth things, prophecy illusions, leave the way, turn aside from the path, let us hear no more about the Holy One of Israel.'"

It reminds one of times when Church leaders have spoken out about injustice or unfaithfulness, only to be ridiculed by the media, and told to focus only on the strictly religious things that they ought to be concerned about. For we know, only too well today, that people do not want to see, or hear the words of the Lord; people long only to hear smooth things, and to turn aside to their own paths. And see the destruction, as Isaiah foretold, which is brought upon a world that no longer hears the words of the Lord, or respects the message of prophets, but turn aside to its own way.

And yet it is, surely, the very prophetic word – even within the church, let alone within the wider society – that we so much need, to recover the way of the Lord, and to perceive (in the words of the general confession) 'those things which we have done but ought not to have done', whether individually or corporately; as a result of which 'there is no health in us'.

The widely respected American Old Testament scholar, Walter Brueggemann – whom I remember hearing lecture, when I was an undergraduate – talks, in his book 'The Prophetic Imagination', about just how much we need, today, the wisdom and genius of the OT prophets, to set us on the right path. And in his book, which applies as much to Isaiah, as to Jeremiah or the other OT prophets, he writes: 'The task of prophetic ministry is to nurture, nourish and evoke a consciousness and perceive an alternative to the dominant culture all around us...' [and we do this] 'on the one hand by criticising and dismantling the dominant consciousness... and on the other hand energising persons and communities by the promise of another time and situation to which the community may move'.

As can be seen, for example, in Isaiah 11, when the prophet foresees the Lord raising up a prophet, at a time of devastation and loss, who 'shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears

hear; but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth.' The prophetic vision, again, which we see fulfilled in Jesus.

So I wonder, then, what are some of the big issues that we need to speak into today, as we relate Isaiah's prophetic critique to our own... as well as holding before people the continuing hope of restoration and peace, returning to a world which appears to have lost its way?

One can't help thinking of the prophetic voice of Greta Thurnberg, speaking into the environmental crisis of our time – after one of the hottest summers on record, with fires raging in the Amazonian rain forest, and governments the world over choosing economic growth against environmental sustainability. Words picked up on by the French president, Emmanuel Macron, speaking in advance of the current G7 summit: 'Our house is on fire... I want you to act as you would in a crisis.'

And if unsustainable patterns of materialism and consumption are irreversibly damaging the planet, what about the disconnect that we seem to have adopted – certainly in the west – between a privatised observance of religious devotion, and unquestioning individualism, on the one hand, and a Biblical awareness that faith is or should be, at every level, connected to ethics and lifestyle: to our moral obligations to each other, to the communities in which we are set, to the needs of the poor, the exploited and the marginalised, to justice and the love of God.

The issues and the challenges are too numerous to even begin to spell out here, but the principle remains, that the prophets recall us – often painfully – to the way of righteousness; to an awareness that we must indeed examine our lives, and speak into the sins of our world; offering, in the name of God, not just a private path of inner salvation (although souls matter too), but a critique and a redemption that is offered by God to the whole of society and creation, a vision belonging to the whole people of God.

A vision, in words of Revelation: of 'A new heaven and a new earth [where] the home of God is [once more] among mortals. [For] He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples & God himself will be with them.' In the name of the Father & of the Son & of the HS. Amen