



**Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on 20<sup>th</sup> March 2022**  
**Readings: Isaiah 55.1-9 and 12-13; Luke 13.1-9**

*'Our religion must be relevant to our lives.'* Discuss, illustrating your answer with Biblical and contemporary examples.

How glad I am my days of writing essays are over. But the essay title matters.

If our religion is Christianity it is rooted in the basic idea that God gets stuck in with us. God is not somehow remote, 'throned in easy state to reign'.<sup>1</sup> God has come to live amongst us in Jesus Christ; Jesus is the man of Galilee, sharing the delights and the dross of daily life, and Jesus is the victim of Calvary, plumbing the depths of our experience. He is also the one sprung from a tomb, leaving it empty because, being alive, he does not need a place for the dead. Nor does he want to leave us there either.

And if it's true that religion must be relevant to what we are living through, then so must the words that religious leaders use to articulate that faith. When we are bereaved, we'll be listening for ideas that assuage our grief. When we are bowled over at how good life is, if we haven't let our good luck fool us that we no longer need God, we'll be wanting resources that enables us to express gratitude. When we are feeling guilty about something, we'll need words that take seriously our shame so it's not ignored, and speak persuasively of God's mercy so we can start again. A religion that is completely separate from our lived reality is hardly going to stir our interest, let alone our trust, our tenacious adherence, or our generous giving.

By that measure, does what Isaiah says so confidently about the goodness of God's purposes and ways help us? We heard of water that slakes our thirst, there were metaphors of rich culinary fare, of milk ... and of wine for the lactose intolerant; of seeds for the sower, rain for the land, and bread for the eater.

And there's more. These material things seem to be symbolic of further gifts. The prophet wants us to be reassured about that *chesed*, the Lord's 'steadfast, sure love', to which God is bound by an inviolate covenant; that God will abundantly pardon all who 'return to the Lord'; and that we will know joy and peace so intoxicating that we will burst into song and clap our hands.

It's an enticing picture. Isaiah's a most captivating preacher. But how does it relate to this week's newscast footage of bombed maternity hospitals, to threats of chemical weapons and nuclear attack, and to people on one side of a border being slain whilst those on the other are given a narrative of liberation and justice even as they are plunged into calamity themselves? How we feel for the people of Russia, too! 'Joy and peace so intoxicating that we will burst into song and clap our hands'?

Well, in order to find in Scripture's prophets a credible word for this season, I wonder if we need to explore what we think prophecy is. It may be that we think the prophet's task is always to proclaim the same message. So if we are Amos, that we are forever going to be sharp-tongued and critical, and if we are Hosea, that we are single-mindedly focussed upon God's inability to stop loving us.

To put it simply, prophets are often characterised as messengers either of disaster or of hope. But what if prophets were more contextual than that? What if they didn't see their vocation as tirelessly to bang on about the same thing, but instead to be more carefully nuanced for the specific circumstances in which they found themselves at any given time?

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<sup>1</sup> Vanstone, W. H. 1977 from the poem at the end of *Love's endeavour, love's expense* London: Darton, Longman and Todd page

The chances are that Isaiah 55 is written to encourage people that their time of exile in Babylon is coming to an end. The writer of this part of Isaiah seems to be fully aware of the legendary Cyrus, founder of the Persian Empire. Isaiah writes as if he *knows* that Cyrus is going to crush the Babylonians and enable the Israelites to return to Jerusalem, the place that re-establishes their identity and seals their hope. This is a *good news prophecy*, so it is that these chapters of Isaiah offer the people what one commentator calls, ‘a message of unalloyed happiness and prosperity which was about to begin and which would never again be disturbed.’<sup>2</sup> It was the right word for that moment.

But what if a prophet of this *chesed*-shaped God were to speak into today’s climate? Surely, if prophecy is legitimised by its relevance to the time in which it is spoken, then it will not always be a song and dance of sheer joy and peace. While the international pressure cooker is screaming as a few of us can recall, save from our history books, there’s no excuse for saying ‘peace, peace’ when there is none. God’s *chesed* is not that naïve, and nor should ours be. At such a time as this, when arguably Europe’s equilibrium has been destabilised more than for eighty years, the Bible witnesses to prophets who have a significantly different emphasis. And amongst them is Jesus. I wonder if you share my sense that he offers the first of three prophetic ideas for us to treat with utmost seriousness.

This first idea is ‘repentance’. Our religion calls us to repent, trusting that God is gracious, ‘nor will leave the desolate to mourn’. In two incidents that are unique to Luke, we find Jesus using the example first of Pontius Pilate massacring some Galilean pilgrims as they go about their worship, and secondly of eighteen victims of a tower collapsing upon them. I sense that we are not meant to interrogate these two episodes too closely, as if their detail and historicity were why they were there. Instead, it seems to me that they are there to remind us how vulnerable we all are, innocent or otherwise. It’s as if Jesus is warning us that we could all be vulnerable to a weak leader’s despotism, or to a fragile wall collapsing. And because of that vulnerability we should repent – turn our backs on anything in our lifestyle that is not life-giving, and sets us at odds with the community, or with God. After all, where is the joy or fulfilment in a life that gets in the way of other people’s prosperity, or, worse still, deals death? Twenty-four hours a day, the news is alerting us to a weak leader’s despotic abuse of power – how chillingly ironic that all the letters of his surname are to be found in ‘Pontius Pilate’. And we’re learning, too, of historic and domestic walls collapsing because they have been blasted. What more do we need to persuade us to examine the way we’re living - as individuals and as a society, and to repent of all that is not wholesome; to turn away from that way of life, those political strategies, which prevent our sisters and brothers – and we ourselves - going out in joy and being led forth in peace? Maybe we heard the call to repent, and believe what’s going wrong is not our fault and there’s nothing for us to repent of. I can see the appeal of such a conclusion. I am just not so self-confident that I can wash my hands of all responsibility for this situation. I am my brother’s keeper; their pain is, in some rather smaller way, my pain. I cannot copy Pontius Pilate and wash my hands.

But even if I can satisfy myself that I am not caught up in this wretched business, I am pretty convinced I do still need to hear the second of this morning’s three prophetic ideas. It’s the corollary of that repentance which is about *not* doing something. This second idea is about what we *must* do instead. To put it starkly, if we turn our backs on that which is death dealing, what is it that we end up facing? Might it be that which is life giving? In the context of the attacks to which Ukraine is being subjected, repenting is only half what we are called to. Indeed, pious breast-beating is worse than nothing. At the Church Meeting that follows this service, we will be invited to consider how we can put these buildings to use as the Ukrainian community in Cambridge welcomes and embraces people fleeing that place. I would have struggled to bear the implications if we had done all the work and spent all the money on this building that we have but not been able to use it for anything save an introspective stroking of our own egos or calming of our own fears.

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<sup>2</sup> Whybray, R. N. 1975 *Isaiah 40-66 in the New Century Bible Commentary* London: Marshall, Morgan and Scott page 24

Remember John Bradbury's catch phrase: 'community of communities'? Might we be able to give expression to God's chesed in this place – just like those who played and sang Johannes Brahms's *German Requiem* here yesterday, and raised the better part of £20,000 for the Red Cross's humanitarian work in Ukraine?

And the third prophetic idea is this: to seek God, to return to God. At the heart of that exquisite Biblical idea of incarnation is God coming to find us. And why? That we might have life. So we open ourselves at a time such as this to the life giver, the life sustainer, the life redeemer, the life renewer. The evidence of history, and of the news, too, is that without God we mess up big time. God, as the giver of mercy, peace and love, of justice, wisdom and righteousness is utterly essential to the living of life abundantly.

So, as we turn from the death dealing, and embrace the life giving, we also seek the Lord, grateful that the Lord by that chesed has already found us. In that light, let's be light for those who are in the darkest of places, until they and we once more can go out in joy and be led forth in peace because Spring, like a miracle, comes once again, in its glory.

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