

Sunday 30th October 2022
Isaiah 53:10-54:10 & 2 Corinthians 1:3-7
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Brightons Parish Church

We have heard God's living Word. May our hearts and our minds be transformed to the glory of His holy name. Let us pray:

Father God, send your Holy Spirit upon us now so that we might hear You in the preaching of Your Word.

Make us open to Your wisdom. Make us receptive to Your will and courageous in response as You speak. Lord, help us to listen. Amen.

Nostalgia, nostalgia is such a lovely thing. Remember the old days, those glorious times when everything seemed to go so smoothly, when things worked and people cared about each other, when people cared about their friends and their neighbors and those they meet up with now and again. Perhaps they even cared about who came to church and who they should be inviting to come along. And, in those days, there seemed to be such unity in the workplace and in the neighborhood. Everyone looked out for each other. And did it not seem as God, as though God was much closer to us in those good old days?

The Bible tells us that the people of Israel suffered from nostalgia. They had gone through a succession of wicked rulers who had led them away from God. In fact, they were at a very low point in their history. At that particular time the kingdom of Israel had been divided and weakened. First, the northern and then the southern kingdom had fallen to their enemies. The land had been laid waste and the walls of the city had been torn down. Even the Temple of God, where they worshiped, had been ransacked and destroyed by their enemies. And, sadly, only a remnant of the people remained faithful to God and they were in exile. They were in exile in Babylon, a nation, a priest weeping in sorrow on the banks of the river Babylon. And they were nostalgic and they remembered Zion and they missed their Holy God; the Bible tells us. And then, through the prophet Isaiah, God speaks these wonderful words to them. He says 'Listen to me my chosen. I am still here. You may be in Exile, you may be in change, you may be defeated and humiliated, you may be oppressed, you may be afraid, you may be forced into poverty and feeling lost and you may be weeping but you've never ceased to be my people. And, through the prophet, we see God opening His arms out wide to Israel, drawing them close to Him, telling them where their comfort lies and where their healing is to be found.

Folks, we must listen, we must listen because the God of Nations, the God of the universe, the God of Abraham and Isaac and Jacob, is also the God of individuals, of you and of me, and He sees the pain in our hearts, He sees the pain of nations, He sees the pain of struggling people and He notices every tear that is shared and every fear nurtured in the heart of every individual. And, amazingly, His Word still speaks to all the faithful who are struggling to make sense of life and all the changes that it brings. Through God's word He comes close to us and He not only says to His people who are starting struggling 'Receive my comfort' He also tells them that they have a role to play in receiving that comfort. And so, God says 'Remember this; the Holy God of Israel is your Redeemer, the God of all the Earth, so do not be afraid however desperate things

might look, however desperate the future may seem, because I am the Lord Almighty, I am in control, I am the Creator God and I know you.'

I think the most assuring thing in this; is that God speaks a word of comfort to Israel of old and He speaks to people of all time and He speaks to us today because He knows us, He knows that so often we see only up to the end of our circumstances, He knows that our words become so small that they very frequently exclude God. And so, in His word of comfort, the Lord says to His people, as He says to us today 'Make your vision of me wider. If you are concerned about tomorrow, include me in because I am a redeeming God, I am the God of tomorrow, I am the God of the future.'

And then God uses an allegory that the people can understand. He says 'Make your tent, that you live in, larger. Lengthen its ropes and strengthen its pegs.' An illustration that can be made our own because, not only as individuals, but as a church, as a group in the church, or as individual families, because I believe that prayer, prayer should be that the Lord would help, that the Lord would enlarge our tents, that in everything we face, every change we encounter, every difficult decision that we have to make, as individuals and as a church, that there is space for God. Because the message to us today is, open your eyes, open your eyes and your heart and allow the Lord God Almighty in. Allow Him to come close to you, to dwell with you in your tent. And we need to pray like Jabez in 1 Chronicles chapter four where he calls out to the Lord. He says 'O Lord, that you would bless me indeed and enlarge my territory, that your hand would be with me.'

'Don't exclude me' says God. 'Don't exclude me because I want to come alongside you. Don't exclude me because I want to walk through the waters with you. Make me part of the challenges that you face and allow me to minister to you. I know you' says the Lord God Almighty 'I know you. I am your Redeemer. I am the God of all the Earth so do not be afraid. I will hear your prayers and I will comfort you.'

You know, when we cry out to God with open hands and expectant hearts, when we make our bold requests to God, miracles still happen. I'm sure many of you can testify to that. And, as we come to Him in desperation perhaps, if we trust Him as we pray for whatever situation we are facing or whatever unhappiness we tend to be feeling at that time. new opportunities will emerge from our situation and the course of our lives will shift

I am the Lord God Almighty I am your Redeemer do not be afraid I will comfort you says the Lord, and then the Lord, in great compassion comes close to His people and He stands amongst them. He stands amongst the weeping exiles and He says to them through the prophet Isaiah 'I will not only comfort you; I will save you.'

You see, Israel really needed to be saved at various levels before God brought them out of exile. He had to bring them out of the bondage, of disobedient and of spiritual laxness. They had wandered from God and then they felt deserted, not surprisingly. They felt abandoned and God had to tell them that their salvation and their liberation are

to start with faith and trust in a God who saves. So again, he says through the prophet 'I will call you back. Because of your disobedience I left you for a little while but, with deep love and compassion, I will take you back, with everlasting kindness I will have compassion on you.' If there's one thing that sufferers through the ages have had in common it's that sense of abandonment. 'I've tried everything, nothing works! I've turned everywhere, I've had no help.' But God's answer to those people and to us today is found in the allegory of the extended tent. You see, a large tent needs longer ropes and stronger tent pegs in the same way that a wide spiritual vision needs a deep spiritual rooting.

The Scriptures teach us that God's love is everlasting. The Lord's desire to redeem and to save us is for real. But here's the thing, we have to turn to Him in fervent prayer and we must do that often and we must trust Him. Israel had to go back to these spiritual roots, they had to trust God, they had to renew their faith in Him, they had to be obedient yet again, they're to knock in the pegs, make firm their spiritual rooting in their saving God.

And the Apostle Paul understood this deep spiritual truth very, very well. Hammering home the tent pigs of trust and faith he says to the foundling church in Corinth, he says 'Praise be to our God and Father who comforts us all in our troubles. We are under great pressure far beyond our ability to endure but this happened so that we might not rely on ourselves but rely on God, on him we set our hope and he will continue to save us.' What Paul's actually saying is 'extend that tent folks' he's saying 'trust in the saving hand of God and be prepared for what God can do and will do' not 'be afraid' says the Lord God 'make firm your spiritual rooting. I know you and I will comfort you.'

But what happens when we are dissatisfied with our situation, when we feel we are at the end of our tether? Do we believe God's Word? Do we go back there and believe that God is an all-encompassing, all-loving, all-saving God? Do we really believe that God will always be there for us? it's a challenge folks. Because, sometimes things go wrong and we just don't know where God is in it all.

At that particular time in the life of Israel, as a nation, they had become very inward looking and so, perhaps, they were wondering whether a promise from the Almighty Creator of the universe was enough for them to be assured, not only of their salvation but also of their future? And I wondered, as I was writing this, is it enough for you and for me, when we are up to the eyeballs in difficulties?

Well, the Word of God says that it is, of course it is, and that, for us folks, is a lifetime guarantee. 'Remember this' says the Lord, 'I am the God who loves you and my love for you will never end.'

You see, the God of Israel is the God who loved the world so much that He sent His only Son, suffering servant, and He sent His Son to save that world so that whoever believes in Him will never perish but will have eternal life.

Jesus not only experienced suffering and death, as we know, He also came through that and He came through that for you and for me. And, just as new life came through the death of Jesus Christ on the cross, so too, new life can be found in the deepest recesses of suffering and of difficult change that we have to experience, if we look through at it, through the eyes of faith. You see, the God who loves us is also the God who carries us, who hears our prayers, who heals us, who gives us endurance during difficult times and pours His peace into our lives. 'Do not be afraid' says God as He stretches out His arm to us. I don't know why I work, I think in pictures folks, but when I read that, I can see God stretching out His arms saying 'Do not be afraid. You are healed in the unbroken, unbreakable clasp of my everlasting love.'

We don't have all the answers. There are so many mysteries in life and so many things that happen that we think 'Where are we going now?' but the one thing that we can cling to is what we know is true and that as our Lord God Almighty and His wonderful Word that encourages us every day and when we sit and remember the good old days, when we become nostalgic about the way things were when we were younger, the days before economic struggles, before high petrol and heating and food prices, before Presbytery Mission Plans and all the change that that will bring, when we become nostalgic folks, we must remember that our God is the God of all the earth and He wants us to include Him in and He tells us to extend our tents, to broaden our spiritual vision, to broaden our vision and our knowledge of Him because He is the God who saves. He wants us to trust Him always. He is a God who shows his love to all of humankind. No one is excluded. And He tells us to knock in the tent pegs deeply and deepen our roots of faith.

And also, as always, the Lord has the last word and He says 'The mountains and the hills may crumble, but my love for you will never end. I will keep forever my promise of peace' so says the Lord who loves you and who loves me. Amen, and thanks be to God.