

ISAIAH 55:1-9
ST JOHN'S, 28.2.16, 9.30 am

INTRODUCTION

'Who do you think you are?' – it's a very popular TV programme, in an age when lots of people spend time tracing their ancestors. People find that they need to know where they've come from – and for people who've been adopted, it's often especially important.

It's true for God's people as well. We all need to understand how the Lord has led us through the past, so we can get a bearing on where we are now. Only then can we hear what he's saying to us about the years to come. So I'm going to begin today by giving you a history lesson! This passage from the book of Isaiah was written for a very specific historical context. If we don't understand that context, we'll find it very hard to hear what the Lord has to say to us through this passage now.

I'm going to begin with the period between Joshua leading the people of Israel into the land of Canaan, through to the time of the Judges. During that period, the land was divided between the twelve tribes of Israel, but was more or less united as a territory. Later, under King Saul, King David and King Solomon, it became a united kingdom, ruled over from its capital, Jerusalem.

After King Solomon died in 975 BC, the 10 northern tribes rebelled against his son Rehoboam. From then on, the southern kingdom of Judah consisted of two tribes, Judah and Benjamin; the other 10 tribes

formed the northern kingdom of Israel. The kings in the north consistently rebelled against the Lord, and taught their people to do the same. Eventually, in 721 BC, the northern kingdom was overrun by Assyria. All the people were taken into exile in Assyria. They never returned.

Meanwhile, the kings of the southern kingdom of Judah were descendants of David and ancestors of Jesus. Some of them were faithful to the Lord; others weren't. Most of the people, as in the north, followed the example of their king. But finally, in spite of what had happened to the northern kingdom, and in spite of endless warnings from the prophets, the people became so disobedient that the Lord decided that he had to act. In 587 BC, the southern kingdom was overrun by Babylonia, and its people were also taken into exile.

Isaiah began his ministry in about 740 BC, about 20 years before the northern kingdom was overrun. Isaiah continued to prophesy in Judah for over 40 years. He warned the king and the people over and over again of what was to come. He prophesied many of the events around the fall of the southern kingdom, and the people's exile in Babylon. But Isaiah's vision didn't end there. He also prophesied about their eventual return to Jerusalem and Judah. Even this wasn't the end of Isaiah's vision, because he also foresaw the coming of the Messiah, and the way in which the Messiah would have to suffer and die. Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah are some of the most

familiar from his book, because we regularly hear them read in church at Christmas and Easter.

The passage we heard this morning comes from the part of Isaiah's prophecies which deals mainly with the return of the Lord's people from their exile in Babylon. In Isaiah's mind, the return from exile is very closely linked with the time when the Lord will establish a lasting covenant with his people through the Messiah. So our passage this morning looks to both the return from exile in Babylon, and to the new covenant in Jesus.

TURN TO THE LORD

Before we look at chapter 55 itself, there's one more part of the context which we need to bear in mind. Isaiah's prophecies about the Messiah's sufferings and death are called his 'Servant Songs'. The most familiar of these is 52:13 - 53:12, and it's clearly part of the immediate context for the vision of blessing in chapter 55.

One of the main thrusts of Isaiah 53 is the message that the Lord can forgive his people for their rebellion against him, because their punishment has fallen upon the Lord's servant instead of on them. Listen to a few verses from that chapter:

*. . . because of our sins he was wounded . . .
we are made whole by the blows he received . . .
the Lord made the punishment fall on him,
the punishment all of us deserved . . .*

The Crucifixion took place more than 500 years after the people returned from exile in Babylon, and more than 700 years after Isaiah wrote his prophecy. Even so, Isaiah is clear that the blessings which he describes here in chapter 55 are available to the Lord's people *only* on the basis of Messiah's sacrifice.

BUT the Lord won't simply shower these blessings out indiscriminately. At the heart of chapter 55, we read these words: *Turn to the LORD and pray to him, now that he is near; let the wicked leave their way of life, and change their way of thinking; let them turn to the LORD our God; he is merciful and quick to forgive (55:6-7).* Isaiah is warning the returning exiles that they can't expect the Lord to show them his mercy, if they're going to carry on just as they had before. Each individual must turn away from wicked ways and evil thoughts, and turn to the Lord. The opportunity is there for them, but they must *turn to the LORD and pray to him, now that he is near*. If they don't take the opportunity, and turn to the Lord now, they may well find that they've left it too late. The Lord has given every one of them a gracious invitation to join him at the feast which Isaiah describes at the beginning of this chapter. But the time will come when the doors are closed, and the banquet begins. Anyone who's refused to accept the invitation by that time will find themselves locked out, and it will be too late to change their minds.

Those who do take the opportunity to *turn to the LORD and pray to him*, will find that the Lord's waiting for them with open arms; they'll

find that the Lord's longing to welcome them to the feast of *the best food of all*; they'll find that he's longing to rescue his people from exile and prevent them from falling into obscurity. If they *turn to the LORD and pray to him*, they'll discover that he *is quick to forgive*. Despite all the ways in which his people have rebelled against him, despite their pride, their stubbornness, their disobedience, their greed, and all the other ways in which they've let him down, the Lord is longing to take them back, to forgive them, and to give them a new start.

LISTEN TO THE LORD

If the Lord's people are going to put themselves in a position to be rescued, the first thing they must do is to listen: *Listen to me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all. Listen now, my people and come to me; come to me, and you will have life!* (vv 2 & 3). This isn't just about giving the Lord half an ear. Firstly, the Lord's people must make a deliberate decision to listen to him; and then they must make a deliberate decision to go on listening to him. Those who truly listen to the Lord will truly hear what he has to say, and they're the ones who will accept his invitation to *come* (vv 1,3).

So, even before the Lord's people hear what he has to say, he's given them a wonderful picture of what he has in store for those who do *turn to the Lord and pray to him*. There's water for the thirsty, food for the poor; there's wine and milk, and the best food of all - luxury - at no cost! In other words, those who listen and respond will receive life (v 3). This isn't just physical life, it's spiritual life, eternal life, life in all

its fullness, life in a personal relationship with the Lord himself. With all these promises of what's in store for those who do listen, Isaiah grabs his readers' attention, before he reaches the heart of the matter: *turn to the LORD and pray to him, now that he is near*.

THE BLESSINGS THE LORD PROMISES

There are various pictures in this passage, which describe the blessings the Lord promises to those who do seek him. As I've already pointed out, at the beginning of the chapter, the Lord promises a feast. This is a very familiar picture from Scripture of what the Lord ultimately has in store for his people. In verse 3, the picture is of *life, a lasting covenant, and the blessings I promised to David*. In some way, the Lord's promising those who return from exile and remain faithful to him, that they'll be included in the promises which he made to David, and that they'll also receive life, in the sense of a personal relationship with the Lord.

CONCLUSION

So what does this message to the exiles in Babylon, 2,500 years ago, have to say to us today? In many ways, much the same thing. The blessings described here are all available to every single one of us - if only we'll *turn to the Lord and pray to him, now that he is near*.

Human beings haven't changed. We're in danger of all the same sins which landed the Lord's people in exile in Babylon: pride, stubbornness, disobedience, greed, and all the rest of it. We may be respectable citizens, pillars of the community. We may come to

church every single Sunday. We may give all we possess to the poor. None of it will do us any good, if we haven't first *turned to the Lord*, if we haven't sought his mercy and forgiveness for the ways we offend him. And if you think you're perfect, then just look at what the LORD says in verses 8 & 9: "*My thoughts are not like yours, and my ways are different from yours. As high as the heavens are above the earth, so high are my ways and thoughts above yours.*" Remember, it took the sacrifice of the Son of God, on a cross outside Jerusalem, to make it possible for us to receive all the good things the Lord promises in this chapter. So let's thank and praise him, and make sure that we're constantly turning to him, and praying to him, while he is near.