

Meditation on Isaiah and Advent. Rev Nick Ball

1. This morning I invite you to reflect on some of the prophecies of Isaiah. I want us to ponder what some of these prophecies tell us about Advent and about our lives today. For the most part I will focus on the prophecies that Handel sets to music in his great oratorio 'Messiah.' In fact this meditation will be enhanced if you have a recording of Messiah to hand, but don't worry if you haven't: the power of the words and their meaning are rich enough in themselves. My father used to play his recording of 'Messiah' quite often and so these words of promise and Handel's music were very much part of my upbringing as was singing in Messiah myself at school.
2. So first what do we know about Isaiah himself? – in chapter six there is a vivid description of Isaiah's vision in the temple and it is dated to the year in which King Uzziah died, which is in about the year 740 before Christ. The passage is a glorious evocation of God, reaching its climax in the words 'Holy, Holy, Holy, is the Lord of Hosts; the whole earth is full of his glory', words which are familiar to us from the Sanctus in the Eucharist. The passage ends with the Lord asking, 'Whom shall I send and who will go for us?' and the prophet replies, 'Here I am: send me'. The message that the prophet is given to proclaim is a bleak one and throughout the book there are threats of judgement and punishment, set alongside passages of hope and encouragement, which are used in this meditation and in 'Messiah'.
3. It is hope and encouragement that we find in the opening words of Messiah. These are the first words of Isaiah, chapter 40, 'Comfort ye, comfort ye my people: saith your God. Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned. The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, 'Prepare ye the Way of the Lord; make straight in the desert a highway for our God.' These verses begin what is often called second Isaiah, because the message belongs to a period at least two centuries after the death of King Uzziah. The promise is that Jerusalem's exile and suffering in Babylon are over and that the kingdom of Judah is going to be restored. The last part is the promise of the voice in the wilderness which in the original setting we identify with the prophet, but which to Christians can be taken to refer to John

the Baptist. And the comfort we look for is the promise that the kingdom can be fulfilled in this world and this life, wherever people respond to the message and promise of Jesus.

4. Isaiah chapter 40 continues, 'Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill made low, the crooked straight and the rough places plain.' At first sight this is difficult because we like valleys, mountains and the hills. Our land is rich in walking country, which I enjoyed in the Lake District when I was a student in Manchester and which I know Paul and Kate enjoy. But taken as a metaphor these words suggest that everything that gets in the way of human fulfilment is going to be swept away. God will straighten out things for us, poverty and prejudice will be no more and humanity will live in the way that God intends.

5. In V5 we hear 'and the glory of the Lord shall be revealed'. God is not hidden, but often we don't hear about how he is revealed in the glory of the arts, in the glory of medical science and astro physics, in the glory of loving relationships between lovers, between children and parents, brothers and sisters, of glorious friendships, the glory of sport, the glory of sacrificial love and care and the glory of worship. But these words point to a new and fresh manifestation of the glory of the Lord which will be manifested in the restoring of Israel, and for us in the new creation of a world order based on justice and freedom.

6. One of the key passages in Isaiah comes as early as chapter 2. It doesn't feature in Messiah but its words are often used when worship takes the theme of peace
'they shall beat their swords into ploughshares,
and their spears into pruning-hooks;
nation shall not lift up sword against nation,
neither shall they learn war any more.'

The promise of peace is one of the greatest needs of the world, just imagine all our arms expenditure being spent instead on agriculture, medicine and green power resources. Imagine the solar energy that warms the Sahara being used to heat solar panels. This is all possible, if humanity will just embrace the vision and work hard to bring forth its fulfilment. The age of fossil fuels must give way to the age of renewables if ecological disaster is to be averted

7. We now come to the words, 'O Thou that tellest good tidings to Zion, which appear in Isaiah chapter 40 and again in chapter 60 and which include the phrases 'Behold your God' and 'the glory of the Lord is risen upon Thee.' Here there is a proclamation of good news for the Jewish community in exile and in chapter sixty for the post exilic community struggling to rebuild the kingdom of Judah. So today we are to be both the hearers of good news and the bearers of good news. I don't know how much you watch or listen to the news, but often the news seems bad, not least in this time of Covid. Often the good news seems to be on a much smaller scale. But in the face of bad news Christians assert that there is good news to tell. There is a promise that God will triumph, that he will reign once we listen to him and heed his message

8. Isaiah 60 and the first part of chapter 9 concentrate on the contrast between darkness and light: 'Behold darkness shall cover the earth and gross darkness the people; but the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the gentiles shall come to thy light and kings to the brightness of thy rising,' and 'The people that walked in darkness have seen a great light. And they that dwell in the land of the shadow of death, upon them hath the light shined.' Advent is a time when we light an extra candle each week on our Advent wreath until at Christmas we light the Christmas candle in the middle of the wreath. Christ is celebrated as the light of the world who has come into the world in his birth in Bethlehem. The challenge of Advent is whether we can light candles outside the church by performing good deeds of mercy and kindness.

9. The last part of our meditation brings us to Isaiah chapter 7 'Behold a virgin shall conceive and bear a son and shall call his name Emmanuel, God with us' and in chapter 9 'For unto us a Child is born, unto us a son is given' In both of these passages the promise is focussed on the birth of a new king. In the original setting this would have referred to the hope engendered by the birth of new king, possibly Hezekiah, in the royal house of Judah. As Christians we can see both the original fulfilment and the greater fulfilment that comes in the birth of our King, Jesus Christ. Advent prepares us for the celebration of the birth of Jesus, the promised Saviour.

10. The passage ends with the four titles given to the new king: Wonderful Counsellor, the mighty God, the Everlasting Father, the Prince of Peace. Wonderful Counsellor speaks of the wise deeds of the king, Mighty God speaks of divine kingship, Everlasting Father speaks of the king as the protector or father of his people, and Prince of Peace means both freedom from war and the prosperity which is implicit in the Hebrew word *Shalom*. In traditional Judaism these words were applied to Hezekiah, but in Christianity they were soon applied to Jesus who was seen as the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

11. I leave you with a question and an invitation: what is your favourite title for Jesus, biblical or non biblical? Try praying to Jesus with your chosen favourite title.