

Sermons at All Saints Anglican Church, Luxembourg

Preached by Rev Geoff Read on Sunday 19th January 2025

Bible Texts: Isaiah 62:1-1-5, John 2:1-11

Since the Israel-Gaza conflict began I have found it sometimes hard to read parts of the Old Testament. Often it's in the psalms as they speak of God fighting on behalf of Israel. But also passages like our OT reading from Isaiah which at first glance speaks of that same exceptionalism and approval

As Christians, as Anglicans, surely we condemn all violence – the initial atrocities of Hamas and the taking of hostages and the subsequent killing and destruction in Gaza by the IDF, the spilling over into neighbouring countries

And while we must never compare or relativise suffering, I think it is fair to say it's become a conflict massively imbalanced by the possession and use of modern, highly destructive weapons by the IDF reflected in the terrible numbers of Palestinian women and children killed or who have died through lack of food, medical care, disease in Gaza

This has impacted all people in the region, including our Christian brothers and sisters in Gaza and the West Bank

Here in Luxembourg sincere people have disagreed about what and how protest and support should be offered

And many have struggled to tread the fine line between a legitimate criticism of the State of Israel and the threat of unwittingly contributing to antisemitism and the very real fear many Jewish families feel in Western Europe

So how do we read, with integrity, passages like our OT one from the prophet Isaiah?

How can we read it in its original meaning and its ongoing meaning for Jewish people?

How may we read it as Christians, laying alongside it our gospel reading in which Jesus symbolises the old order in water held in huge water jars used for ritual washing which he then turns into new wine?

Isaiah 62 starts by speaking of Zion, and Jerusalem – Zion is the name used for that city especially for its religious significance. It is a holy city lying at the heart of a holy land

Its the place where, in the former Temples, God could be encountered, heaven touching earth

Zion is also the place where, Jews believe, the Messiah or Christ – God's chosen One, the ultimate righter of wrongs, will finally come

And all this is rooted in the covenants God made with His people over hundreds of years – stretching back to Abraham and through to King David, a series of Covenants that call the Jewish people to be God's chosen people — a chosen people living in a holy or chosen land, given to them by God's promise, His covenant

And with being chosen comes to the Jewish people a call to be themselves holy – to be walking adverts of what is possible in relationship between human beings and God for which God will either bring blessings for obedience or curses for disobedience

But this calling is not just for their benefit

There is also a call for the Jewish people to “be a light, to lighten the nations” – like a city on a hill, to which all nations, Jews and non-Jews alike will be drawn to know and worship God

The prophets like Isaiah are sent by God as God’s Law or Covenant enforcement agents - the ones who both foretell – point to what is coming in God’s purposes

And also forth tell – explain why things are as they are in terms of these Covenants

And this is the role of Isaiah as in Ch 62 we find him prophesying to the Jewish people in Exile, away from their holy land but with the promise of return

And why are they away from this holy land, this holy city?

For disobedience – that was Isaiah’s prophecy at the start of his work, before and as they go into Exile

But Exile is not just to punish.

Isaiah says that God’s purpose in Exile for His chosen people is to also work in them to purify, awaken them to God’s loving call and purposes once more

Which is the context for making sense of this passage

In v1 it speaks of God not being silent, not resting for Zion and Jerusalem’s sake

And of salvation, God rescuing from harm, which strangely is described as like “a burning torch” – there is the light to the nations image

But if you think about this image of burning a torch – the torch is itself affected by the burning

And here is the metaphor, word picture about the call of the Jewish people to holiness

Burning, heat, fire is an image in the Bible so often about God’s work in people to bring about holiness and purifying, painful as that is, just as Exile has been painful but also purifying

But then see all that follows this painful transforming purifying – “glory”, their transformation represented by a new name – no more Forsaken, Desolate, but instead my Delight, Married as God brings His people home

Then the most tender of images – as a bridegroom rejoices over his bride, so shall God rejoice over you, his chosen people

What happens when you lay this status of chosen people – not just for themselves, but also for the good of others - what happens when we lay this alongside all we see unfolding in and around Israel today?

Indeed when we do this for any country that makes exceptional claims for religious reasons – think about the Christian nationalism that has helped to bring Donald Trump once more into the White House

Yes, Israel a secular state, but one whose identity and being is intimately interwoven with this story and calling?

I wonder what the prophet Isaiah would be saying today? To and about and for Israel ...

About its land? Its right to defend but within the limits of international law? And its calling to be a light to the nations?

A vocation that, I believe remains: even in the light of Christian belief that, in Jesus, Messiah is no longer awaited but has come.

Let's turn our attention briefly to that, and how we as Christians read this passage

As Jesus begins his work in John's account, his gospel, this is the opening in chapter 2

A wedding – how interesting given that tender image in Isaiah all those years before of God rejoicing like a bridegroom over his bride

And an image of purification – not fire, but water. The water used to ritually purify a Jewish person held in six massive jars (v6), loud echoes of the Covenant

And that image, the water, is then literally transformed as Jesus quietly performs his first miracle as it turns into the best of wine: not just an act of compassion for a young couple's wedding on a shoe-string

But as what John calls a "sign" – like a signpost, "that revealed His glory" (v11)

Glory is a word that is about something that happens which points to God present and at work

Eventually there will be seven signs in John's gospel, actions of Jesus that reveal more and more of that glory – provision, freeing, healing, lordship over nature, raising Lazarus from the dead

And the greatest will be – the raising of Jesus Himself from the dead

It is because of this whole gospel story of Jesus, the Christ, the One who reveals Himself as fully God and fully human that Christians re-read passages like this one from Isaiah as being about Jesus

Not replacing its original meaning or indeed the calling of the Jewish people, but expanding it, speaking of a New Covenant that has a greater fulfilment in Jesus and in which all people are fully invited into God's presence, what is sometimes called the heavenly Jerusalem or Zion

It is an invitation to all and an entry for all that is made possible by Jesus' death and resurrection that clears away, transforms all that stands between us and God

A bit like the clearing of all that stood in the way of God's people returning home from Exile

A bit like the difference, the transformation of stale, standing, ritual water into sparkling rich wine