

“God's wills & won'ts”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 1 May 2005 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Isaiah 2:1 - 4:6
<u>Reading</u>	Isaiah 2:1 - 4:6
<u>Hymns</u>	244, from Mission Praise 849 from The Source
<u>Songs</u>	40, 32, 151, 69 from Mission Praise 559 from The Source
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So who will you vote for on Thursday?

Will you vote for more of the same?

More taxes and less results?
Or will you vote for less taxes and more spending,
even if the sums don't add up?
Or will it be for the 'real alternative'?

Or perhaps you have had enough of Brussels' interference in our every day life
and our national heritage
and will vote to get us out of Europe;

Or even put on your environment-friendly hat
and put your cross on the recycled paper voting slip.

Or we could have a party called the Christian Humbugs.
We could vote for them.
They would soon tell us all what to do!

Or how about the Religious Left Party,
where Totalitolerance is the primary value
and pluralism reigns supreme.

Or if God had a political party,
would you vote for him.
Would you dare to let him loose on governing our nation?

I am of course,
playing games,
but my intent is to make a serious point.

All of the major and the minor parties have one thing in common,
and that is to build a secular society.
A society which has no intrinsic values of its own,
but borrows values from other systems as it thinks fit.
A society that eschews any notion that its values may be based upon
any particularly religious thought.

Did you notice that when Turkey wants to join the European Union
it promotes itself as a modern 'secular' state
even though over 80% of its population is Muslim.
Only on this ground can they ever hope to gain entrance into the EU.

Have you noticed that though we still have free speech in Britain to day,
the Church has virtually been silenced.
Rarely, if ever, do we hear the church in any form
speak out publicly on any issue.

Where are the Isaiah's of our day?
And if there were any,
what would they be saying to our nation?

If we elected God to be our Prime Minister,
what would be his manifesto for the future of Britain?

These are not questions that we are going to attempt to answer tonight,
but they are perhaps questions that we should bear in mind
as we look at what God was saying through Isaiah
to the people of Judah and Jerusalem in the 8th century BC.

Isaiah was called to be a prophet as a young man,
according to his own testimony in chapter 6,
in the year that Uzziah, king of Judah, died.

Uzziah himself had come to the throne at the age of 16 years
and had reigned for 52 years,
one of the longest reigns of that period of Jewish history.
At first, instructed by the prophet Zechariah,
he had followed the ways of the Lord
and he had prospered.

Under his government,
Judah had become strong again,
had extended her territory to the south and east
and had subdued the Philistines in the west.

He had a large well-equipped standing army.
He built the latest in defensive and offensive weaponry,
fortified towers on the town and city walls
and outposts in the desert.

The land enjoyed peace and prosperity.
The people had never had it so good.

Sadly, when he became powerful,
he also became proud
and he tried to usurp the role of the priests by burning incense in the temple,
which only the priesthood were allowed to do.
As a result, God smote him with leprosy
and his son ruled in his stead, till he died.

His son Jotham, was also a good man
and he too followed the ways of the lord.
But there is a note in 2 Chronicles 27:2 under Jotham's reign
which says that 'the people continued their corrupt practices'.

So the picture we get of the society to which Isaiah was called to prophecy
is of a proud and prosperous people,
who had become corrupted by their wealth and stability,
who no longer followed the laws nor the ways of God,
except perhaps in a formal religious way.

These people thought that all was well.
They thought they were secure within their own land.
They were well off.
They had enough and to spare.
They fulfilled their religious obligations by going to the temple as required,
by holding the feasts as prescribed by the law
and offering the sacrifices demanded by their God.
Just like the nations around them did for their gods.

But their leaders were corrupt.
The people did not care for one another as they should have done.
Morality had taken a back seat.
Selfishness,
personal gain
and oppression of the poor and weak in society,
were common-place.
Suppression of their neighbours was the culture of the day.
And God was not pleased with what he saw.

So he sends Isaiah as his messenger into their midst
to sound a warning bell in the affluence of the day.
One can imagine that he was not particularly welcome.

In chapter 1,
which we considered last week
Isaiah slams into them with the most damning indictment that you
could imagine
and they must have wondered what had hit them.

'Where did that come from?'
 'Life is good here.'
 'God must be pleased with us.'
 'What is this mad prophet on about?'

But their consciences had been dulled by their everyday corruption.
 Their eyes were blinded to their own immoral and sinful ways.
 They were 'good' people. (Or so they thought)
 Their city was secure.
 What on earth could be wrong?

So in the first few verses of our passage today,
 Isaiah paints a picture of how God sees his holy city.
 It is a picture both of what it should be
 and of what it will be when God has completed his work among the
 peoples of the earth.

It is culled in mountain top terms,
 which the people would understand.

In those days,
 worship was conducted on the tops of hills,
 the tops of mountains.

A bit like Therfield really,
 where many of us come up the hill to worship God here.
Every nation worshipped their god on the tops of hills.
 You will see frequent references to high places,
 throughout the Old Testament.
 The people would understand the symbolism.

So God sees his House, his temple, his dwelling place
 to be on the top of the mountain,
 indeed the highest mountain,
 above the hills;
 the highest of all places.
And all nations will come to it.

And the people will *want* to go up to God's house
 because this is where they will learn God's ways.
 There will be a law there which is good.
 There will be justice
 and there will be peace.
 This is the New Jerusalem.

In the Bible, Jerusalem,
 or Zion, as it is often called
 is the place where God lives and will live in the future.
 And this is a picture of what it will be like.

And the challenge to them at that time was that Jerusalem was not like that.
It was a place where God was only worshipped as a formality.
Where God's thoughts were not understood nor valued.
Where God's teachings were not to be heard being preached.
Where God was, in practice despised,
because the cause of man
was placed higher than the cause of God.

And the challenge is the same to us today.
Is the church the place where God is,
or is it just a place where we meet for fun and games?
a place where we sing a few repetitive hymns about how wonderful he is;
about how good we feel about ourselves?
Or is it a place where we come longingly to seek his face?
Where we come to learn his laws
and his thoughts
so that we can walk in his ways?

So Isaiah closes this oracle with the plea to the people in verse 5.
"Come oh house of Jacob, walk in the light of the Lord."
Oh that we would!

The next section runs from chapter 2:6 to Chapter 4:1 and contains 3 oracles.
When studied carefully,
they are fascinating,
but obscure.

The remainder of chapter 2 tells how God will bring down the proud
and humble the mighty,
sometimes as though it has already happened.
There will come a day when all that they have put their faith in will be destroyed
and they will not only *have* nothing,
they will *be* nothing.
They will throw away their idols in which they put so much faith
and only the Lord will remain supreme.

And again Isaiah closes this oracle with a simple word to the people.
"Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils.
Of what account is he?" [Isaiah 2:22](#)

The next oracle is more direct.
The Lord will take away both their supply and their support.
He will remove all the leading and skilled men from their society –
a forewarning of the deportation which would take place later
when all the people of any standing were taken away as hostages to Babylon –
and only 'boys' would be left to govern them.
They would seek a leader
and no-one would be willing or able to lead.

And why?

Because their words and their deeds are against the Lord. (3:8)

Disaster (3:11) is upon them.

“They will be paid back for what their hands have done.”

Verse 12 is interesting:

“Youths (or children) oppress my people, women rule over them.

O my people, your guides have led you astray,
they turn you from the path.”

At first reading you might think this is a slight against women

and if it were written today, it would be.

But in its context it is an indictment of the leaders, who were men.

It was the men who had failed the people they should have been serving.

They were behaving like children and women,
who in that society were in a lower class to the men.

Even today we can insult a man by saying;

“He’s such an old woman” (Though it’s not PC to do so.)
or slight our male bosses by saying,

“They’re behaving like children”.

We all know that children are unfit to govern

and in that day,

women were unable to govern as they were completely uneducated.

You see this again in verse 14

where God sits in judgement on the elders and leaders of his people,

who were men:

“It is you”, he says, “ who have ruined my vineyard,

the plunder from the poor is in your pockets.”

We see this today in dictators like Mugabe and others

who siphon off the riches of their country, into their own Swiss bank accounts,
while their people live in poverty.

And we see something of this in our own land,

as we see our politicians struggling to retain or regain or attain power.

Are they really motivated by a desire for the good of the people?

Do they really want to see justice,

righteousness,

health

and wealth in our land?

On Thursday, you will have to decide.

And then in the third of these indictments,

Isaiah does have a go at the women.

They strut their stuff in the latest fashions,

they are haughty and proud.

They too will be struck down,

because as the men are taken into captivity,

they will become destitute
and seven men will take hold of one surviving man
and seek his name
in a society where a woman had no standing
unless she was within the family of a man.
This is not a judgment on them for wearing fashionable clothes,
nor even expensive jewellery,
but a foresight on the prophet's part
of how a proud and haughty nation will be brought low,
both men and women,
because they have failed to follow in the ways of the Lord
and have put themselves in the place of God.

But judgement is not an end in itself.

God's way is not to condemn and leave us in judgement.

There is always hope.

God's judgements are never purely punitive.

He always has restoration in mind.

And so Isaiah paints another picture of what the future holds in the verses 2-6 of chapter 4.

The Branch of the Lord is a picture of Jesus Christ.

It is through him that there will be restoration
and the result will be beautiful and glorious.

The Lord will wash away the filth of the women of Zion –
an allusion to the sins and evil committed by God's people
throughout the centuries.

The cleansing will be painful,
but the result will be protection under the canopy of God's love
and the glory of his presence.

This is a picture of salvation through Christ,
purification from sin
and our final resting place as the dwelling place of God.

So in short,

in tonight's passage,
Isaiah has slated both the leaders and the people for their failings,
he has warned them of God's coming judgement
and he has assured them of their eventual restoration.

So what is there here for us?

Well, let's look quickly at just a few things:

God hates a proud heart.

Those who elevate themselves
and look for adulation from others
will be brought low.

How often we put ourselves in place of God.

We will be judged for this in God's own way
and his own time.
Our nation has rejected God, his ways and his values,
and Isaiah's words remind us that this will not go unnoticed by God.

Secondly, God holds those he has placed as leaders of his people
and leaders of nations
responsible for the way they rule and guide
those over for whom he has given them responsibility.
He demands both personal humility
and loyalty to himself
in those whom he appoints
and we, in the Church
should be aware of this
and uphold our leaders,
support them
and encourage them wherever we can
to practice the ways of the Lord.

Thirdly, that there is always hope.
God is a restorative God.
He always looks for ways of restoring his people to a proper
relationship with himself
and bringing them back to his fold.
If you think Satan is getting at you,
look again.
It may be that God is chastening you,
reminding you that you are entirely dependent on him.

And finally that all is under his hand.
The nations are his;
we are his;
the whole earth is his.
Everything he does has a purpose –
to redeem mankind and to establish the Kingdom of God –
where he will reign supreme
and we shall spend for ever more with him,
through Christ.

May that be our hope
as we continue to serve him here
until Jesus comes.

Amen