

THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

Sunday 2nd October 2005

Isaiah 52:13-53:12 The Gospel according to Isaiah

There are times when I marvel that more people – if not all people – do not come to believe the Gospel. It all fits together so beautifully, it is so unique a story that so completely explains all our experiences, that it is self-evidently true.

Yet equally evidently, most people have either no interest in the gospel, or are interested only to ridicule and discredit the story – or perhaps worse, to make it out to be no more than just one of many stories of spiritual enlightenment.

On reflection, of course, this should not really be a surprise – for if Mankind was inclined to believe the Gospel, then there would be no Gospel to believe in – because we would also have believed God in the Garden of Eden, thus there would be no sin in the first place, hence no need of salvation!

The credibility gap which we need to cross if we are to make the gospel “reasonable and relevant” to those around us is not unique to our post-Christian post-modern post-caring world. It has always been thus, as Isaiah would tell us from the reaction of the Jews to his early exposition of the Good News, and as Paul certainly makes clear when he refers to the “foolishness of the cross” in the opening chapter of 1 Corinthians.

Perhaps the biggest hurdle of all is the biggest of all sins, and arguably the root of most sins too – that of pride. Pride rears its ugly head in all manner of ways in our world, just as it has since the beginning of time.

Our pride is the inclination we have to believe that we are special, that we are important, that our views and opinions have real value. Now in a sense these things are true; but pride leads us further, to the point where we think our specialness, importance and worth are inherent in who we are, and are superior to any other. So no-one else has the right to tell us what to do, to criticise our work or our beliefs, to say that we have done wrong.

It is a profound irony that as society has excluded God more and more from its philosophy, in an attempt to elevate ourselves and make us more important, quite the reverse happens. Without God, the universe is meaningless and random, and our contribution to it infinitesimal. If we are on our own, then that does not make us great, it makes us microscopic specs on a microscopic spec of a planet in a microscopic spec of a galaxy, existing for just a fleeting moment!

It is only in relation to God – the ultimate and infinite creator of everything - that our true worth can be seen – it is only if God thinks that we have worth that we have worth. This passage from Isaiah illustrates just how much God thinks we are worth.

Yet such is the power of sin that many will not see this; for the Gospel according to Isaiah flies in the face of accepted thinking.

To accept the Gospel, we need to accept a number of things which go against the grain. Firstly, we need to accept that we have done wrong. We have transgressed. We have sinned. Like sheep, we have gone astray. This cannot be blamed on our upbringing, our environment, or even our genes. We have deliberately and knowingly done things which are not right – whether in deeds, in words or even in thoughts. We are guilty of falling short of the mark.

In our liberal age, where anything goes, it is fashionable to say that we allow people to do whatever they want as long as they don't harm anyone else. This is at the crux of the current debate on smoking in public places, such as pubs – if smoking only caused *you* harm, then there wouldn't be much of a case against it. But because it can harm those around you, and particularly the bar staff who have no choice about whether to be there or not, then it must be banned because it breaks the new golden rule.

This stands in contrast to drinking alcohol, which is something you do that affects your own body - you don't contract sclerosis of the liver through the effects of secondary drinking!

But to say that an alcoholic only harms himself is to ignore the myriad of other ways in which his drinking harms other people – even if there is no violence against his wife or children, there is the emotional distress which frequent drunkenness can cause, and the financial hardship which the family must endure when money is wasted on drink instead of providing more of the necessities of life.

If we are honest with ourselves, we will see that it is not just gross sins like drunkenness which has a bad effect on other people. Whenever we fall short of the mark, it can and does have an effect on other people as well as ourselves. If we lie, someone else is misled or hurt; if we are greedy and take too much pie, there is less to go round the rest of the family. The stark reality of our sinfulness is that, even by our own liberal standards, we are all sinners.

But this is just the first hard fact we need to accept. Having owned up to the fact that we are sinners, the next difficulty is to recognise that this sin needs to be paid for. Punishment is such a harsh concept to accept; it smacks of our uncivilised roots, of barbarism and medieval times, of injustice rather than justice.

We may accept that the worst of crimes need to be punished, although even here we have become used to the notion of life sentences for one-off murder being commuted to just a few years. But it is abhorrent to suggest that we should be punished for the minor misdemeanours that we are responsible for, even if these misdemeanours have led to others being hurt. And it is especially abhorrent to suggest that such punishment should be prosecuted by a loving God, who preaches forgiveness.

Here I think our post-Christian generation suffers more than most. The message that God is love, and that he offers forgiveness, has been taken out of context so that the common conception is that God is a kindly old grandparent who smiles approvingly at his naughty grandchildren. How could he fail to forgive if he is so loving?

After all, doesn't the Church teach that we must forgive and forget? So how can God intend to punish us when we do wrong, if he expects us to forgive each other?

Here we get to the heart of the matter, and nowhere is this more clear, in the Old Testament at least, than in tonight's passage. For God does indeed love his people, and he does indeed want to forgive them for their sins. But he must also punish that sin – not because he is spiteful and unreasonable, but because wrong-doing is such an affront to his holiness.

You could argue that God could simply accept a heartfelt apology from us and no more would need to be done. But if that were how it worked, I wonder how long it would be before we did the same thing again, only to return later with a slightly less heart-felt apology? And how long would it be before we treated sin so lightly that we didn't really feel the need to apologise at all?

You see, God insists that the wages of sin is death because sin is the major problem in the universe. It is a big deal, whether it is murder or rape, or lying and cheating. God cannot stand these things, so if we are to get close to him, these things have to be fully dealt with. Unless it is paid for, the books won't balance.

This is the second big hurdle we need to cross to accept the Gospel: that our sin must be paid for.

The third big hurdle is the manner that God chooses to pay for this sin. We are used to the idea of rulers ruling, and the mighty getting their way by force. The post-cold-war foreign policy of the USA and hence the UK too has followed this route, by and large: remember the promised "shock and awe" bombings on Baghdad? If that is what the world super-power does, then we should expect something similar from the world super-God.

Isaiah has been building up to this point in his prophecy, whipping up his hearers to almost fever pitch in expectation of what the Arm of the Lord is going to do to deliver Israel from the hands of her enemies, as in Isaiah 51:

*⁹ Awake, awake! Clothe yourself with strength,
O arm of the LORD;
awake, as in days gone by,
as in generations of old.
Was it not you who cut Rahab to pieces,
who pierced that monster through?
¹⁰ Was it not you who dried up the sea,
the waters of the great deep,
who made a road in the depths of the sea
so that the redeemed might cross over?
¹¹ The ransomed of the LORD will return.
They will enter Zion with singing;
everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them,
and sorrow and sighing will flee away.*

Then again in the preceding few verses of Chapter 52:

*¹⁰ The LORD will lay bare his holy arm
in the sight of all the nations,
and all the ends of the earth will see*

the salvation of our God.

So what shock and awe does God have in store for the world, what mighty demonstration of total superiority will he give, what great victory will he win? Whatever it is, it must be big!

It doesn't take a great scholar of history to see where the kind of mighty shock and awe that Bush was fond of takes us. Great military battles have played an important part in world history, arguably they are sometimes the lesser of evils as a way of dealing with tyrannical regimes. But this type of force does not bring about a lasting peace or a lasting change. For that to happen, people's lives need to be changed from the inside out. National Socialism was defeated in Europe not just because of the military victory in World War 2, but because the ideology was shown to be corrupt and evil, otherwise in time it would have raised its ugly head again.

So the working of God's mighty arm to bring salvation would have to tackle the very heart of the problem, which was not the captivity of his people in Babylon. That was but the symptom, the disease as we have seen was sin.

The way in which this was to be done was indeed shocking and awesome, shocking because it is such an unthinkable way for the super-God to behave, and awesome when we realise its effect on our lives and our destiny.

Despite the pride we thought of earlier, we like to have heroes to look up to – but these heroes can't be ordinary men and women, they have to be strong, talented, beautiful, and successful. Those are the sorts of people we will take notice of – not the poor and the weak and the ugly and the losers. So the very manner which God chooses to deal with our sin becomes another hurdle to us – we do not expect or want to see the suffering servant, disfigured, marred beyond recognition, without any beauty or majesty, a poor loser with no friends and no hope. No wonder such a man was despised and rejected, no wonder people were appalled at him and despised him. So for many the cross is at best a mystery and at worst a defeat, a sign of weakness and hopelessness.

But to us who by God's grace can see the truth, we recognise that on the cross God was dealing with the problem of our sin – as Christ took our punishment on his own shoulders. He was pierced, but it was for our transgressions. He was crushed, but it was for our iniquities. He was punished, but it was to bring us peace. This was not a defeat at the hands of Satan, but a pre-meditated act of sacrifice. It was God's will that he should be crushed and suffer, because he was a guilt offering – an offering which paid for our guilt.

This is what sets the Gospel apart from all other faiths, and which rules out any possibility of there being any other road to God. For if we could get right with God by any other means, no matter how hard or mysterious, then why would God put his own dear Son through such agony? There was, there is, there will be no other way.

When I spoke last time, on Isaiah 44, we looked at how it was that God could know the future. When liberal scholars look at Isaiah's prophecies of Cyrus and the fate of Israel, they have an easy way out – they can claim that the book was written after the event. Because there are no manuscripts of Isaiah dating before 500 BC, they can sleep easily knowing that they cannot be disproved.

But Chapter 53 gives them quite a different problem. Our passage has more than 40 detailed prophecies which were fulfilled exactly by Christ – and we have manuscripts dating a hundred of years or more before the event.

(Show prophecies on projector)

So how do they explain that? Echoing our opening thought, you might think they would be convinced by the whole thing and accept the Gospel as true; but no, they contort the evidence to come up with a theory which allows them to continue in their liberal ways. Believe it or not, one explanation is that Jesus deliberately engineered events so that he would be seen to fulfil these prophecies, so there is nothing supernatural about it! What bunkum! While another is to refuse to see Christ in these verses at all.

It goes to show that there is none so blind as he who will not see.

Before we get that warm holier-than-thou glow because we *can* see the truth of the Gospel, we need to consider a little further what our acceptance of all this means for our own lives.

There is of course the deduction that if sin has such terrible consequences, then we should do all we can to flee from it. If even our little sins offend God so greatly, then surely we will want to give them all up in order to live lives that please him more? That alone should dampen down our pride.

Further, there are profound consequences for us in the way that Jesus behaved. After all, he is our supreme role model, so we do well to imitate him. Paul makes this very clear in Philippians 2:1-11 – a passage which is clearly inspired by Isaiah 53:

Read Philippians 2:1-11

In humility consider others better than yourselves. Now there's a tough one!

Sad to say, this is not a popular message even in our churches today. I was very disappointed to hear what the General Director of the Evangelical Alliance, Joel Edwards, had to say on his "thought for the day" on Radio 4 last week. Speaking of the need for respect in society, he said that it was important for us to think of others as our equals. Now we can all see where he is coming from, and it is a very politically correct statement which no doubt he would be applauded for making; but Paul goes further, to say we should consider them *better* than ourselves. Joel missed an opportunity to not just echo what society is thinking, but to preach something more radical.

What does that mean in practice? Does it mean that we assume that everyone else's *ideas* are better than our own, so we abandon our own ideas? Well I don't think this is quite what Paul had in mind, especially considering that his inspiration in saying this was Jesus Christ himself. So how did Jesus consider others better than himself?

Well, not in any moral sense, of course- for we are all sinners, whereas he is not. But he did consider us to be more important – he considered our lives to be more important than his own. That is why he gave up his life for us – if he did not, then he could have saved himself from the cross, or more to the point saved himself from having come to earth in the first place!

It is that self-sacrificial love for others which we are to emulate. Of course, we cannot give our lives in exchange for other people's souls – because we have sinned, we deserve to die for our own sins, so cannot die in another's stead. But we can give up some of our own pleasures and "rights" in order to help other people.

Once more we have to be careful that we do this for the right motives. Sin is so subtle that what starts as a Christ-like act can quickly become tainted and selfish – if, for example, we like to help others so that we are recognised and praised for our good works, or because we like the feeling it gives us to help other people. Our motivation should be out of love for the other, out of desire to help and serve them.

Just as Jesus was "esteemed not" when he came to save us, so too we may well not be recognised for the work that we do. Now we do try to remember and thank those who serve in whatever way, because that is also a Christ-like thing to do. But if you get upset if no-one remembers to thank you when you spend all day helping in the kitchen preparing the harvest supper, then maybe you've missed the point! If Christ was ignored when he came to die for us, then we can probably put up with being ignored when we peel the potatoes!

Now this is a radically different way of life from society around us, where by and large the message is to seek your own peace and happiness first. Many do this by seeking to amass money and material wealth, only to find that they are no happier than when they had relatively little – and have wasted their lives in the process.

But as Ranald reminded us at last night's harvest dinner, whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Christ will find it. This is the way of the suffering servant. A way of non-sense for those who will not see their own sin, the punishment that this brings, and the only way of salvation through Christ. But to those who are being saved, it is the power of God. For although his servant suffered and died, he was also lifted up and highly exalted. This is the thought at the beginning and end of the passage, and the reality at the beginning and end of time.