

## **THERFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE**

4<sup>th</sup> September 2005

Isaiah 44:23-46:13 Knowing Who Knows the Future

One of the first things President Bush said when he addressed the people of New Orleans and the surrounding area after Hurricane Katrina struck, was that they should keep their spirits up because things would get better, they would be able to get their lives back to normal eventually.

We could talk for hours about the style in which he said it, and the actions or lack of them that accompanied this assurance; but that's not what we are here for. Setting these things aside, what Bush knew and what every leader should know is that people need hope to see them through the hard times.

Cynics will point out that such assurances and hope might prove to be hollow, if in fact the situation is doomed to failure. Yet even here you could argue in response that it might be better for people to think there is hope even when there is not, than for them to give up hope and be miserable to the end.

If, however, you knew for sure that things *would* work out in the end, then hope would be well placed and would help sustain you through the difficulties. Having something to look forward to, having a sense that you are making progress towards your objective, is key to keeping a healthy mind through trying times.

Last December when I was assigned to two troubled projects at work it would have been good to know what the future would hold. These projects are developing ground-breaking and complex products in cell culture for pharmaceutical research, and innovative developments like these are notoriously difficult to predict and manage. Both were due to complete in February this year, but such has been the trouble that it looks like it will be November before they are essentially complete. On the one hand, to know that the pain would go on so long might be a crushing blow; but on the other hand, we could have prepared for it better, both financially and organisationally, and been psyched up for a longer race. Even now, it would be good to know if November is a reasonable date, or whether more problems will be uncovered which blow us off course again!

Elsewhere in our lives, the same is true. It might not always be best for us to know the details, but to have a reasonable hope for the future makes life worth living today.

Left to ourselves, some of us will be optimistic, but others will be pessimistic... but if we knew for sure that things would work out, even the pessimist could take heart.

Knowing the future is a prize indeed.

Yet it is also a prize beyond our reach. Despite the flights of fancy of science-fiction writers from HG Wells on about time machines, we cannot predict what will happen tomorrow, let alone next week or next year. We might take educated guesses, like the much publicised predictions of the top three disasters likely to strike the USA – an earthquake in California, a terrorist strike in New York, and a tornado in New Orleans. But it takes more than an educated guess to persuade people to change their lives, especially if that would mean giving up things they hold dear.

Many claim to know in detail what is round the corner - the fair-ground fortune-tellers, the newspaper astrologers, the street-corner end-of-the-world-is-nigh-ers, and of course the loony God-in-a-spaceship cultists. To believe them is great foolishness, as they can offer no substantial evidence to justify their claims.

For who could? Who could know the future, and who could we trust if they revealed it to us?

Such a person would have to be above the world we know, able to see it in context, to know it completely, to even be able to influence it to bring about what he predicts. He would have to be above us in every sense of the word, vastly more intelligent, knowledgeable, and powerful. Further, for us to trust what he said, he would have to be both honest and infallible, superior to us morally as well as intellectually and physically.

If such a person exists, then you would want to know more about him as opposed the future as such, as he is obviously the most important being in existence, and knowing him would be a much more precious prize than knowing what the next week has in store for you.

Interestingly, this is the real significance of Isaiah's prophecy: not so much the revelation of the future that it gives, but the revelation of the character of the One who predicts it.

That's not to say that the revelation of the future is not remarkable in its own right – it is so remarkable in fact that the liberal scholars have no option but to claim that it cannot be authentic, but must have been written *after* the events that are predicted. Unlike other prophecy – even some in the Bible – Isaiah actually mentions by name a king who's great great grandparents have yet to be born! More than 200 years before the event, God reveals that he will use a ruler called Cyrus to return his people from exile and to rebuild Jerusalem!

**45** *"This is what the LORD says to his anointed,  
to Cyrus, whose right hand I take hold of  
to subdue nations before him  
and to strip kings of their armour,  
to open doors before him  
so that gates will not be shut:  
2 I will go before you  
and will level the mountains;<sup>a</sup>  
I will break down gates of bronze  
and cut through bars of iron.  
3 I will give you the treasures of darkness,  
riches stored in secret places,*

*so that you may know that I am the LORD,  
the God of Israel, who summons you by name.  
4 For the sake of Jacob my servant,  
of Israel my chosen,  
I summon you by name  
and bestow on you a title of honour,  
though you do not acknowledge me.*

The story of the fulfilment of this prophecy can be found in the book of Ezra, and in other secular histories of the period. A ruler called Cyrus did indeed arise from the kingdom of the Medes and Persians. By all accounts he was an ambitious man, intelligent and resourceful. Together with his Uncle Darius, he captures and defeats the military super-power of Babylon, as recorded in Daniel 5 and the episode of the writing on the wall.

Cyrus had, for his time, a liberal attitude to the people he had conquered. Perhaps in order to win the favour of more gods, perhaps to ensure the co-operation of the bulk of his vast empire, his policy was to repatriate people and their gods to the lands they had come from. So his instructions to the Jews to return to Jerusalem and rebuild their temple was not a special favour to them, but one of many decrees to the people who had been displaced by the Babylonians. He was not doing this out of a conviction that God was uniquely to be feared and obeyed; but nevertheless he was fulfilling his destiny, outlined to Isaiah two centuries before!

Now for us looking back, this is an amazing piece of evidence to testify to God's power and sovereignty. To those who heard it from Isaiah's lips, it would have sounded quite different. First of all, they had not yet been taken into captivity, so the need for rescue would not be felt. Then there was no known king called Cyrus, so that might seem to discredit his claims still further, or at least to weaken its case. It would be as difficult for them to believe Isaiah as it is for us to believe those who prophesy today, for example, about a widespread revival in Britain.

So how does Isaiah seek to authenticate his message? How, for that matter, does God seek to persuade the people that he is speaking the truth and so they can trust him?

Well, in a way he doesn't. And why should he? Is it anything to God if we refuse to believe his revelation? Does it prevent him carrying out his plans if we don't accept what he has told us? Hardly, because as we have seen God is able to use people who don't accept him to further his plans anyway!

He doesn't offer to perform some magic tricks so that they will believe what he says about the future. But he does reveal more about himself, so that they might be drawn to him.

This is absolutely key. The revelations of the future are not the primary purpose of the prophecy – though they ought to serve to encourage the Jews when they do get carted off into captivity. It is God's character which is the main thing for the Jews, and for us, to know. If we understand a little of who God is, what he has already done, and what his motivations are, then we will know something more significant than a fragment of the future.

*44.<sup>24</sup> "This is what the LORD says—*

*your Redeemer, who formed you in the womb:  
I am the LORD,  
who has made all things,  
who alone stretched out the heavens,  
who spread out the earth by myself,  
<sup>25</sup> who foils the signs of false prophets  
and makes fools of diviners,  
who overthrows the learning of the wise  
and turns it into nonsense,  
<sup>26</sup> who carries out the words of his servants  
and fulfils the predictions of his messengers,*

He and only he is the creator, both in general of the universe and the world around us, and in particular and specifically *our* creator.

He and only he has full wisdom and truth; others who seem to be devout in their religion or sound in their science are but fools in comparison.

*45:<sup>5</sup> I am the LORD, and there is no other;  
apart from me there is no God.  
I will strengthen you,  
though you have not acknowledged me,  
<sup>6</sup> so that from the rising of the sun  
to the place of its setting  
men may know there is none besides me.  
I am the LORD, and there is no other.  
<sup>7</sup> I form the light and create darkness,  
I bring prosperity and create disaster;  
I, the LORD, do all these things.*

He and only he is God, Yahweh, the Lord.

There is not a separate God of darkness to balance the God of Light. Many ancient religions saw a need to have different forces pulling in different directions in order to bring balance to the cycle of life – hence the myriad of Egyptian, Greek and Roman gods. We see the echoes of this today, both in the resurgence of the Yin and Yan, and in the light and dark side of the Force in Star Wars.

Now this could be a sermon in its own right – the relationship between Good and Evil. Suffice to say for now that there is only one God, who created darkness as well as light, and who brings disaster as well as prosperity. He is sovereign. So, hard though it might seem to swallow, Hurricane Katrina, the Boxing Day tsunami, and even 9-11 did not take him by surprise. He permits these disasters to happen.

Does that mean that he is both Bad and Good? Absolutely not! The next verse reassures us of this:

*<sup>8</sup> “You heavens above, rain down righteousness;  
let the clouds shower it down.  
Let the earth open wide,  
let salvation spring up,  
let righteousness grow with it;*

*I, the LORD, have created it.*

God's plans for his creation are righteous, they are without any evil; ultimately, they are for Salvation, to rescue us from the world where both disaster and prosperity may be our lot. To understand this we need to understand the whole problem of sin, which is also a sermon in its own right!

*45:<sup>15</sup> Truly you are a God who hides himself,  
O God and Saviour of Israel.  
<sup>16</sup> All the makers of idols will be put to shame and disgraced;  
they will go off into disgrace together.  
<sup>17</sup> But Israel will be saved by the LORD  
with an everlasting salvation;  
you will never be put to shame or disgraced,  
to ages everlasting.  
<sup>18</sup> For this is what the LORD says—  
he who created the heavens,  
he is God;  
he who fashioned and made the earth,  
he founded it;  
he did not create it to be empty,  
but formed it to be inhabited—  
he says:  
‘I am the LORD,  
and there is no other.  
<sup>19</sup> I have not spoken in secret,  
from somewhere in a land of darkness;  
I have not said to Jacob’s descendants,  
‘Seek me in vain.’  
I, the LORD, speak the truth;  
I declare what is right.*

Now there is on the face of it a contradiction in terms in verse 15, where God reveals himself as a God who hides himself! I think the meaning here may be two-fold – on the one hand, God is in his nature *transcendent*, as the theologians say. In other words, his very essence is beyond us, he is not made of the stuff that we can see and feel and touch – so he is hidden.

I think there may be a further sense here. God could, if he so chose, have created a world in which his existence was irrefutable, he could have placed banners in the sky advertising his presence, and regularly appeared on TV to make sure people remembered.

But that is not his intention. In a sense, God deliberately hides himself from his creation, so that those who acknowledge him do so because they choose to, not because they have no option.

Now if this was all his revelation then we would be pretty lost. Our position would be similar to the Muslims, who believe that God is beyond us, and as such cannot really be known by us in this world. But that is not the God of the Bible. Isaiah goes on to reveal that God has purpose for the world – firstly a specific purpose for his people Israel who will be saved forever, and secondly a general purpose in that he wants us, mankind, to inhabit the earth – that is the purpose of his creation, not to have a cosmic firework show, but to provide a suitable home for us!

Although hidden in a sense, God is not silent. He has not left us entirely to our own devices and in the dark. Rather, he has deliberately revealed himself to us, especially to the people of Israel. Which is just as well, because we could not have found out anything about him by ourselves. His declaration here is that those who seek him will not seek in vain – what a marvellous promise from a transcendent God!

Most significantly, he has revealed that he is to be trusted, both in that he speaks the truth, and in that what he speaks is morally right. For instance, a despot speak the truth when he said “I will pursue a policy of ethnic cleansing”, but that would not be *right*. If we have difficulty reconciling the idea of a loving God with the fact that he allows disasters, we must first accept that he *is* right in what he does. The path to enlightenment does not start by sitting in judgement on God or demanding that he justify himself. Isaiah deals with this rather humorously in 45-9-11:

45:<sup>9</sup> *“Woe to him who quarrels with his Maker,  
to him who is but a potsherd among the potsherds on the ground.  
Does the clay say to the potter,  
‘What are you making?’  
Does your handiwork say,  
‘He has no hands?’  
<sup>10</sup> Woe to him who says to his father,  
‘What have you begotten?’  
or to his mother,  
‘What have you brought to birth?’*

I think this is the rub. We have to remember that God is not our equal, that we do not have the right to argue with. We must accept him for who he is, otherwise we will never know him, to our eternal loss.

When we accept him, all of these strands fit together into a coherent picture. Firstly, God has explained how he and only he can see the future – because he is the Creator and sustainer of the world, able to do as he chooses and carry out his purposes without fail. Secondly, he has revealed his character, his justice, righteousness, and amazingly his love for his creation. So the revelation of the future is, in a sense, little more than the inevitable outworking of that character into our destinies.

It would be out of character for him to abandon his chosen people in captivity, so that they disappeared into obscurity like many other ancient peoples.

It would be out of character for him to leave mankind without salvation, to not provide a Saviour for us who could make us right with him again.

And it would be out of character for him to let the world continue forever as it now is and has been for thousands of years, ravaged by disasters both man-made and “natural”, and most of all ravaged by sin and death.

*45:<sup>22</sup> ‘Turn to me and be saved,  
all you ends of the earth;  
for I am God, and there is no other.  
<sup>23</sup> By myself I have sworn,  
my mouth has uttered in all integrity  
a word that will not be revoked:  
Before me every knee will bow;  
by me every tongue will swear.  
<sup>24</sup> They will say of me, ‘In the LORD alone  
are righteousness and strength.’ ”  
All who have raged against him  
will come to him and be put to shame.  
<sup>25</sup> But in the LORD all the descendants of Israel  
will be found righteous and will exult.*

The ultimate fulfilment of this lies not 200 years after Isaiah wrote his book, nor even 2000 – for it has yet to come. Not only Isaiah, but Jesus, Paul, and many others spoke of the time when every knee would bow to the Lord, to the only God and creator. This time will come, just as certainly as a man called Cyrus would arise and send the Jews back to rebuild Jerusalem. That day will be a glorious day, but not for everyone. For while God offers salvation to the very ends of the earth, there are many who reject this and rage against him – and they will be put to shame.

I pray that all of us would, instead, be found righteous in Christ and so will exult on that day!