

## THEFIELD CHAPEL EVENING SERVICE

8<sup>th</sup> May 2005

Isaiah 5 How fruity are you?

This week, we sat in judgement on the leaders of our country. Even though Tony Blair was and arguably still is the most powerful man in the land, he was and is answerable to the people. And we the people concluded that although we don't like him as much as we used to, we still prefer him to Michael Howard or Charles Kennedy.

Unlike our American cousins, this was not a Presidential election – though the media circus does its best to turn it into a beauty parade of the three would-be Prime Ministers. The Conservatives too, perhaps because they lacked a more positive appeal to the middle ground, tried to make the character of the Labour leader a major issue – a tactic which it would appear back-fired as many were put off by the negative campaign.

But Tony Blair and the Labour party was judged not just on his character, or on any single decision he had taken, even though a large section of the population disagreed with his decision to support the US in invading Iraq and for some this was a major issue. In the broader picture, the voters concluded that the fruits of a labour government were more attractive than those of a Conservative one.

Had his record been much worse – had the economy been weaker, unemployment much higher, inflation more burdensome – then it could have been a different story. For the key middle ground of the public are not driven so much from ideological positions, as by results. It does not matter to Mr Floating Voter whether the government is Red, Blue or Yellow. What matters is that it produces the fruit they like, the results which suit them best and make their lives most comfortable.

And why shouldn't they take that view? Is that not what democracy is all about? Is it not that very accountability to the public which acts as a check and balance to stop our leaders from becoming dictators and acting purely in their own interests for their own advancement?

Well, maybe. But did you spot the fatal flaw in this reasoning, the flaw which is, as the years go by, disintegrating our society and ultimately threatening our comfortable lives?

We expect our politicians to act in our best interests, not in their own. But we demand the right to have our best interests served, and not other peoples. We are accustomed to our leaders being answerable to us, but resent the thought that we are answerable to anyone.

So, as a gross caricature of the British public, but one with some truth in it, the well-off vote Conservative because they lower taxes and protect their wealth, the poor vote Labour because they redistribute wealth from the rich, and the middle classes float between the two and vote for the party most likely to benefit them through the balance of taxes, services, mortgage rates, employment prospects and so on.

Only a few vote Green, because they want to care more for the environment than their own standard of living.

This is, almost inevitably, the fate of secular democracies. In rejecting any form of natural authority of one person over another, each one becomes their own master. So each one looks after their own interests first... and the fruit of this self-centred attitude poisons society further until eventually it disintegrates.

Such a fate is inevitable because societies such as ours are based on a fundamentally false premise. Like any structure built on dodgy foundations, it is just a matter of time before it will fall.

The root of this is the assertion that we are answerable to no-one, the refusal to accept that we are accountable to God for what we do. That same core failing was apparent in the people of Israel and Judah to whom Isaiah prophesied nearly 3,000 years ago, and it is striking just how many parallels there are between what he says about that society, to what we could say about our own today.

Isaiah starts with a story in song, using a subject which his listeners would be very familiar with: planting a vineyard. Everyone wanted their own vineyard, and knew the ins and outs of making it successful. This was a lengthy process, requiring many years of effort before a good result could be gained – as wine-makers today will tell you.

First and foremost, the right location had to be chosen – on a hillside where the soil was fertile, the drainage good, and the grapes could soak up the sun. Having chosen the right site, the soil had to be prepared – not just dug to remove old vegetation, but filtered to remove all the stones, so that the roots could spread easily. This could take a whole year to achieve.

Next, the vines themselves should be planted – not any old vine, but the best that you could afford. For the quality of the original vine dictates the quality you can expect from the fruit. At the same time, the stones that had been cleared would be built into walls to keep animals away and so protect the vines. Another year's work.

The bigger vineyards would need to be protected from thieves too, who would come and steal the harvest – so a watch-tower would be built to help deter such criminals. And to complete the estate, a wine-press would be built so that the grapes could be turned to juice as soon as they were picked.

All of this would take several years of hard work, with perhaps a few more years to carefully train the vines and get them fully established. Only then could a return be generated, as the wine started to flow.

All of this was common knowledge to the people, and common experience too. As Isaiah's song progressed, they could all sing along. And when it got to the punch line, where after all that effort the vines produce bad fruit, the crowd would share the sense of frustration, disappointment, and even anger that the gardener would feel. It is natural to feel this way after investing so much time and energy into a project, only to find that it does not produce what you had hoped for.

Like all good stories, the people were engaged by it. They were in full agreement with the verdict: the vines, which failed to produce good fruit after so much care and attention had been lavished on them, deserved to be destroyed. They were ready to push down the vineyard walls themselves!

And then Isaiah reveals the real punch-line of the story: they are that unproductive vine! God is the patient gardener who has done everything possible to get them to bear good fruit. They are the vine which has failed to produce what was expected, and must now suffer the consequences.

This technique of using an engaging story to get a hard message across to people is powerful, even today. It helps to remove the natural self-righteousness which makes us unable or unwilling to accept criticism. Famously, Nathan used this device to point out to David the magnitude of his sin in stealing Bathsheba from her husband Uriah, and then arranging for him to be murdered. He was blind to his own sin, until Nathan told him the story of the rich farmer who stole a peasant's only sheep, an injustice which outraged David and then forced him to acknowledge his own great sin.

The master of this technique is Christ himself, who even used the same illustration of a vineyard that Isaiah had used:

*Luke 20:9-19*

The Jewish leaders knew all about the symbology of Israel as God's vineyard, and so they immediately understood that Jesus was criticising them for rejecting the prophets – hence their reaction.

Now the point of Isaiah's song to the people was to make them realise that they were accountable to God, that He expected them to produce good fruit in their lives. Since they were producing bad fruit, they were about to come under judgement.

Isaiah goes on to bemoan the bad fruit that they are producing, and the list of woes could well be a description of our own society.

This first woe is against those who “add house to house and join field to field” (v8), those who are constantly enlarging their estate. When Israel was first founded, everyone had an equal share of the land, and that was supposed to be how it stayed. Land could be “sold”, but was to be returned at the next 50-year Jubilee. Those criticised here were exploiting, or maybe evening engineering, the ill-fortune of others around them, so that they could take control of surrounding fields and property – and in so doing drove others into deeper poverty.

Now buying a bigger house for an expanding family is not what is being condemned here; rather, it is the accrual of worldly goods at the expense of others which is being criticised, the “I'm-all-right-Jack” attitude which does not care who has been oppressed in order to give me what I want. Our shopping sprees in attractive malls hide the fact that many of our purchases will have been produced by exploited workers, and indeed that many jobs have been lost here as manufacturers move production to much cheaper countries. These are issues that should concern us.

The progression from greed to self-indulgence is easy, v11:

*Woe to those who rise early in the morning  
to run after their drinks,  
who stay up late at night  
till they are inflamed with wine.*

Unfettered greed stems from the notion that our own pleasure is what is important, which in turn means we indulge ourselves at every opportunity. So Friday and Saturday nights see vast numbers of young people drink to excess, partying into the night with no thought of God, and no consideration for others as they loudly and sometimes violently make their way home.

Allied to these outward sins of greed and self-indulgence is the inner sin of cynicism about God's ability to act. The people of Isaiah's day took the absence of any obvious judgement from God to mean that he was either happy with what they were doing, or unable to do anything about it. So in verse 19 they sarcastically call on God to act, to show them his plans if they are different to their own.

Cynicism about God also abounds today, maybe not so much in daring God to act, as in construing God to be a liberal grand-father figure who lets us get away with whatever we want, and loves us just the same. The holiness and righteousness of God are forgotten, so that wickedness and sin are excused.

And so the next woes are inevitable, v20-21:

*Woe to those who call evil good  
and good evil,  
who put darkness for light  
and light for darkness,  
who put bitter for sweet  
and sweet for bitter.  
Woe to those who are wise in their own eyes  
and clever in their own sight.*

If this is not a definition of post-modern morality, then what is?

When our starting point is ourselves, we become greedy and self-indulgent. We reject any thought of moral restraint from God, and anything goes. We can do what is right in our own eyes, each deciding for ourselves what is good and what is bad. Even the terms good and evil become meaningless, because there are no morals, there is nothing to judge right and wrong by.

The fruit of such thinking is not a utopian world where everyone is happy doing their own thing. Rejecting moral absolutes does not result in a spectrum of behaviours from what we used to call good to what we used to call bad; but inevitably the bad becomes the norm.

This is one of the great frustrations I have with the media today. In advocating a moral free-for-all, the behaviours which are portrayed as common are what we would call immoral. Virtually the only sexual practice which is rarely if ever promoted in the media is heterosexual monogamy! It is portrayed as a bad thing for someone to be a virgin much past the age of 16. We have indeed put good for bad and bad for good.

Isaiah's final woe at first seems to repeat the woe of self-indulgence, v22-23:

*Woe to those who are heroes at drinking wine  
and champions at mixing drinks,  
<sup>23</sup> who acquit the guilty for a bribe,  
but deny justice to the innocent.*

What he is condemning is the social injustice which comes from the abandonment of moral standards. Instead of being concerned with the fortune of others, people are concerned with their own pleasure. Things which from God's perspective are either trivial or ignoble – such as making a great cocktail – are given more status than things which to God are important and noble – like ensuring justice is done.

Now in our country you could argue that we have a good criminal justice system. There are very few cases of bribery and corruption in the judiciary and the police, certainly when compared with the rest of the world. The British sense of fair play continues.

But even that is eroding. Consider for instance the antics on the football pitch. It is now common practice for strikers to take a dive in the penalty box if they think they will get a penalty; and no-one ever criticises players for not telling the truth when a dodgy goal is given or a genuine one disallowed. Each player thinks it is more important to win the game than it is to tell the truth.

So this attitude that justice is not as important as success takes root in our hearts and minds at an individual level, and our legal system seems content to let that happen. The recent demise of Rover cars is a case in point, where the infamous Phoenix Four, who "rescued" the company 5 years ago, appear to have been creaming off money into their own pockets rather than steering the company to a secure future. While the ordinary workers face a massive deficit in their pension scheme, and hence much less pension than they deserve, the top executives have arranged 6-figure pensions on the basis of their 5 years at the top.

It is interesting that the lack of social justice is the final woe, the culmination in God's eyes of the Israelites sins. That speaks volumes of the care that God has for his creation, the love for others which he has and which he expects us to share. God's concern about our moral standards is far from academic or prudish: it is because abandoning his standards leads inevitably to injustice and suffering for the poor.

And that is not all it leads to, as Isaiah warns them in v26-30. In quite dramatic language, he paints a picture of the forthcoming invasions from Assyria and Babylon, which will be swift and irresistible. Such a downfall may not be instant, but it will happen; our nation, and indeed the whole of the decadent West, is foolish to think we may be an exception.

While the fate of nations may be an interesting subject to speculate on, this is not the main application of this passage to our day. For that we must go back to the beginning, to God's disappointment with his vineyard because of its bad fruit.

You see, whether we like it or not, we are answerable to God for our actions. Life is not a game, where we can play around according to whatever rules we choose. Neither is God one god amongst many, where it doesn't really matter which religion you follow, or even if you mix and match to suit yourself.

God is the god of history, the god of all mankind. Note how the God of Israel commands the other nations in v 26 – he whistles, and they come running! Such is the universal scope of his authority.

We must wake up to the fact that this is so.

This is a radically different world-view to the one which says there is nothing outside of us, so we must listen only to ourselves. This reminder applies just as much – if not more so – to the church as it does to the rest of society; apart from anything else, we are supposed to know better. But inevitably, the views of the world around us affect our own views:

*Excerpt from NIV App commentary, P120*

A sobering thought. So just how much difference does God make to our lives?

There is no doubt that he wants to make a difference, which is why he gives his Holy Spirit to all who believe in him. He longs to produce good fruit in our lives that contrasts sharply with the bad fruit that our own natures will produce.

Galatians 5:19-23:

*19 The acts of the sinful nature are obvious: sexual immorality, impurity and debauchery; 20 idolatry and witchcraft; hatred, discord, jealousy, fits of rage, selfish ambition, dissensions, factions 21 and envy; drunkenness, orgies, and the like. I warn you, as I did before, that those who live like this will not inherit the kingdom of God.<sup>22</sup> But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,<sup>23</sup> gentleness and self-control. Against such things there is no law.*

Are these fruits seen in growing abundance in our lives? Sometimes we are not the best judge of this ourselves, for God's process of transforming us is not instantaneous. Sometimes other people will notice the changes he makes before we do! So don't lose heart if you think you are not producing any fruit. Like that vineyard, it can take a while for the hard work to pay off!

But look closely at your heart, to make sure you are leaving room for the Holy Spirit to work there. Like the fruit he brings, he is kind and gentle, so he will not force us to change when we are content to stay as we are. He is also faithful, and we can be sure he will make our lives fruitful as he has promised – if only we let him.

So how fruity are you?