

"Here is your God"

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 17 July 2005 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Isaiah 40
<u>Reading</u>	Isaiah 40
<u>Songs</u>	from Mission Praise: 200, 271, 663, 457, 266, 263 from The Source: 246
<u>Author/Speaker</u>	Paul Rydon

What was your immediate reaction
when you first heard the news of the London bombings last Thursday week.

Did you call your loved ones to check that they were ok?
Did you ring your friends to pass on the news?
Did you pray?
And if you did what did you say
and more importantly, who did you pray to?

My first intimation that something was wrong
was when my son Andrew e-mailed me to tell me he was ok.
I immediately turned on the television
and watched the horrendous news unfold.
I also e-mailed my daughter Lois in Bangkok
to let her know that Andrew was ok
and rang my wife, Ruth, at work to tell her the same.
By the following morning,
the extent of the carnage began to clarify
and the newspapers reported that people had assembled for prayers
in Churches,
Mosques
and Temples up and down the land.

I often wonder, and still do
what it is that drives people to their knees in times of adversity.
Why does an overtly secular nation turn to some *one* or *something* outside of itself
when it feels vulnerable and weak.

And you and I unwittingly may play a part in this.

A few weeks ago
I was lunching with a few female colleagues
from my erstwhile place of work,

when the subject of religion came up.
They discussed another guy whom they knew was a Christian
but then commented that I was relaxed about my faith
in fact, commented one of the girls,
as a result of something I had said at a difficult point in her life
she had attended church
and felt so much better for doing so.
Another lady then commented that she loved to attend Mass,
that she found it so comforting.

Again, at my informal French class a couple of weeks ago,
the subject of religion arose
and my French teacher commented that she had recently tried the
Spiritualist Church, but didn't think much of it.

I am sure that many of you could recount similar episodes
woven into the hustle and bustle of your daily lives
but what interests me tonight
is that in spite of the heavily secularised society in which we live,
interest in spirituality is not only ever present,
but increasing.

Religion is now very much in the news.

With the rise of Islam,
there is a lot of anti Islamic feeling in the country
and expressed in our newspapers,
but those same newspapers also mention the Bible and Christianity
as the relationship between true Islam and fundamentalist Moslems
is explored.

Some of the interest is political,
but there is a spiritual element too.

For many,
the secularist and humanist views have failed to deliver.
Only religion, it seems to some,
offers a moralistic framework by which to order society.

Christianity appears to have failed
as the West increasingly debunks its moral framework,
but fails to find other answers to the modern needs of law and order.

So many,
feeling their personal vulnerability and inadequacy
turn to the supernatural to find answers to the increasing absurdity of
the modern world.

But do they find God?

In many ways, the people of Judah were in a similar position to us.

They had sinned against God and failed to follow his ways.

As a result their nation was in a state of decay.

At the time this chapter of Isaiah was written,

the people of Judah had just been let off being ransacked by the Assyrians,

but the prophet could see the rising of the Babylonian threat,

which God would use to finally punish His people for their sins against him.

Some scholars believe that this chapter marks the beginnings of a second Isaiah,

(viz a second prophet of the same name)

but there is no need to interpret the material in that way.

It is better to see that a weary Isaiah receives a second call in his latter years

to deliver a new message to God's people who need it now,

but will also need it long after Isaiah is gone.

The first half Isaiah was a message of judgement and is recorded in Chapters 1 to 35.

Then there is the historical interlude in Chapters 36 to 39.

Then there is the second half,

a message of comfort and salvation,

recorded in chapters 40 to 66.

And so our passage opens with God speaking to Isaiah.

"..... Comfort my people". (Isaiah 40:1)

"Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and proclaim to her ... that her sin has been paid for." (Isaiah 40:2)

This is the new sermon series that Isaiah is to preach to the people,

and this chapter is just the introduction.

It is a message of comfort for now,

but it is a prophetic message of future salvation.

God wants his people to know that there will be an end to their suffering

and that He is coming back.

He will redeem them.

He will shepherd them.

and He will restore them.

There are in fact three messages in this chapter,

and each will be developed further in the ensuing chapters of the prophecy.

The first is in verses 3 to 5.

"In the desert, prepare a way for the LORD,

make straight in the wilderness a highway for our God." (Isaiah 40:3)

It is an image of the coming of the LORD as he returns to save his people.

You only have to look at a new road being built today to see the picture.

Look at the new southern Baldock bypass currently under construction a few mile from here.

The hollows are being built up,
cuttings are made through the high ground,
they've even built a tunnel through the Weston Hills.

Isaiah is looking forward to the return from Babylonian exile,
which would occur in 538 BC long after his death.

But John the Baptist would pick it up in the New Testament (in all four gospels)
in answer to those who wanted to know who he was.

"I" he says, "am the voice of one crying in the Wilderness,
make straight a path for the Lord.

I am not the Christ,

He is the One who comes after me
the thongs of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie". (John 1:22-28)

Isaiah was the herald for the return from exile, when God would lead his people back
to Jerusalem.

John the Baptist was the herald for the Messiah when the Son of God came to
earth to redeem his people back to His Father.

And just so should *we* be the heralds of the return of the Christ at the
end of the age,
when he comes to take his people to himself.

But in each case **repentance** is part of the deal.

The highway must be prepared.
The shortcomings and the excesses,
the twists and turns,
the deviant pathway
must all be submitted to God in repentance
to make the way smooth for God to return in all his redemptive power.

In verse 6 we get some detail of this second call.

The Voice says "Cry".

And Isaiah replies "What shall I cry? "

In Isaiah 6:8, the Voice said "Whom shall I send? And who will go for us?"

Isaiah replies, "Here am I. Send me."

And God gives him a message of judgement.

This time Isaiah is in no doubt that he is the messenger,

but he needs to know the message.

And what is the message?

"All flesh is as grass"

I wonder what Isaiah thought.

Here he is ready to deliver a message of comfort and hope and this is
all he has to say?

"The grass withers and the flowers fall."

It's like me coming in here tonight and as I come in you say to me
 "What are you going to preach about tonight, Paul?"
and I reply, "The Lord has told me to tell you you're all rubbish.
 You flourish for a little while and then you're gone."

But then as I wrote this last night and as I say it to you tonight –
 This *is* the message, but not quite!

Because we're not rubbish.
 God didn't make any rubbish.
We as fallen sinful mankind,
 we make rubbish.
 But what God made was good.

But we *are* like grass.
 We are here today and gone tomorrow.
If ever we needed reminding of our frailty
 we were reminded last Thursday week in the London Bombings,
 when four determined young men gave up their lives
 to demonstrate their anger against Britain
 kill 52 innocent people,
 maim countless others
 and make millions of people fear for their lives.

Or the Boxing Day Tsunami,
 where the forces of the natural world were unleashed
 killing thousands
 and leaving countless thousands without relatives
 and without homes.

Yes, "Surely", says Isaiah, "the people are grass,
 but the word of our God stands forever." (Isaiah 40:7-8)

What God has said will stand forever,
 but the Creation which he made has a life span.
He breathed into man the breath of life,
 but at his word it will pass away.

Contrary to what some would have us believe, we are not gods.
 We are but the creatures of the God who is.

Which leads us on to the third message of Isaiah in this chapter,
 encapsulated in the words in verse 9.

"Here is your God"

The Sovereign Lord is coming, with power as a Ruler,
 He comes with reward and recompense, as a Saviour,
 And he comes as a shepherd, to care for his flock.

But who is this God?

And here we are treated to this amazing list of rhetorical questions:

'Who has measured the waters in his hand?

Who has held the dust of the earth ...

or weighed the mountains ... or the hills in a balance? (40:12)

'Whom did the Lord consult to enlighten him

Who was it that taught him knowledge?' (40:14)

'The nations' he says are 'just a drop in a bucket',

He weighs the islands as dust on the scales. (40:15)

It is not that these things are valueless,

but in comparison to God,

they are nothing or less than nothing.

With what can you compare him?

A man goes out and gets a piece of hardwood.

He carves it into an image.

He covers it with gold or silver.

Then he stands it on a shelf

and worships it.

'Are you stupid?', says God.

Don't you know?

Haven't you heard?

Haven't you understood anything?

And yet we do the same.

We put our trust in the things we have made.

We accumulate wealth and it gives us security,

or so we think.

But our God sits enthroned above the earth.

He sits outside of space and time.

He has a panoramic view from a past eternity to a future eternity.

He is the God who is from eternity to eternity.

He is not part of the earth as some would have us believe.

He made it!!!!!! And its peoples are like grasshoppers.

He put each star in its place.

When it comes to the rulers of the earth,

he sets them up,

and he knocks them down.

They are but chaff in the wind.

God is not belittling what he has made.

Nor is he claiming to be a harsh dictator over the affairs of men.

This is pure comparison.
And we need to take note.

In today's evangelical climate we treat God as though he is one of us.
We argue with him as though he were an annoying colleague at work.
In an age that has forgotten what authority is,
we belittle God
and grouse at him when we don't like his answers to our prayers.

But he is not a God to be trifled with.
He is as far beyond our reach as the farthest star in the milky way.
Yet he is a God who keeps his word.

We may think that God does not understand our needs,
just as the Judeans did,
but we forget that our God is the God who never sleeps,
never tires,
never weakens
and never grows old.

This is the God,
the only one there is
who will return with redemption and restoration.
This is the God you can take comfort in
because he is always there
and his word, his promises, endure for ever.

He made us,
He loves us but he is not in us,
unless we are Christians.

If we are Christians,
if we have been reborn,
then we will have received his Spirit
and the Holy Spirit dwells in us.

But we are not gods.
We are merely human beings,
made in the image of God,
humble sinners whom God has redeemed.

We are weak and unfaithful servants.
Yet we can take comfort from the closing words of this chapter
that 'those who hope in the Lord will renew their strength.
They will soar on wings like eagles;
they will run and not grow weary,
they will walk and not be faint.

He is our inner strength.

If you are weary of serving the Lord,
or just simply weary with life,
take heart.
For God has stooped down to manhood in Jesus Christ
and he will restore your strength.

May we all know the blessing of his comfort
as we seek to serve him here
until we come face to face with our Redeemer.

Amen

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Note: All Biblical references are to the New International Version unless otherwise stated.