

“Justice & Righteousness”

<u>Occasion</u>	Evening Service at Therfield Chapel
<u>Day, Date & Time</u>	Sunday 26 June 2005 at 18:30
<u>Basis</u>	Isaiah 32:1 – 35:10
<u>Readings</u>	2 Kings 18:1-12; Isaiah 32:1-8; 32:15-18; 33:20-22; 34:1,2,8; 35:1,5-6,10
<u>Songs</u>	from Mission Praise: 5, 123, 40, 11, 685, 155, 77
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Would you like to live in a world
 where righteousness and justice are the hallmarks of society?
 Well this is exactly what Isaiah foresees for the people of Judah in today's passage.

We like to think that we today live in a country where righteousness and justice are
 valued for their own sake,
 but sadly this is often not the case.

A few months ago, traffic wardens were reintroduced to the streets of Royston.
 Prior to that had been a period during which there were none
 because the police had withdrawn the service
 and the local authority had not appointed new ones.
 The result was chaos.
 People were parking all over the place;
 on double lines,
 in the High Street,
 obstructing the traffic lights in Kneesworth Street
 and the town breathed a sigh of relief
 when the fresh-faced 'yellow perils' re-appeared.

But why? The law had not changed.
 It was still illegal to park on double yellow lines.
 It was still illegal to cause obstruction.
 It was simply that there was no-one to enforce the law.
 No one to punish the offender.

Two days ago,
 I read a report
 that up to 25% of insurance claims in the Bournemouth area have been
 proved to be bogus.
 The commonest being the reporting of 'stolen' mobile phones
 when in fact they had simply been lost,

wasting many hours of police time
and costing insurance companies many thousands of pounds.

You may think these are small things.

Maybe they are.

But they are symptomatic of the contrariness of our sinful human nature.

We long for truth,

justice

and righteousness

provided we have personal freedom to do as we like.

But the God of the Bible reveals himself

as a God who will build a people who delight in Justice and Righteousness

and He will raise up a king who will promote these qualities.

At the time that Isaiah was preaching this evening's passage, a new young king,
Hezekiah, had ascended the throne of Judah.

According to Kings,

he was a godly man

who did right in the eyes of the Lord.

He tore down the shrines where earlier monarchs had encouraged idol worship.

He followed God's ways

and obeyed his laws

and God prospered him.

He threw off the yoke of the Assyrians in the North

and overcame the Philistines in the South.

During the early years of his reign,

Samaria and the northern Kingdom were besieged

and over-run by the Assyrians.

The people had been taken into captivity

and their land re-populated with foreigners,

because they had sinned against the God of Israel and his ways.

As we shall see next week,

it was due to the godliness of this man

that God delayed the judgement of Judah

and removed the threat of the Assyrians.

Maybe it was the presence of this Godly man on the throne in Jerusalem

that prompted the prophecy with which our passage opens tonight.

"See", says Isaiah "a king will reign in righteousness

and rulers will rule with justice" (Isaiah 32:1)

Not only will the king reign in righteousness,

but his administration will provide justice.

(Verse 2) Each man will be like a shelter and a refuge,

like water in the desert

and shade in the harshness of a hot dry land.

There will be someone to whom the oppressed can go
where their problems and needs will be assuaged.

Under such righteous government the people will be transformed.

(Verse 3) Their eyes and their ears will be opened -

they will perceive and receive the truth –

(Verse 4) Their minds will understand and their tongues will be fluent –

they will understand and communicate God's ways.

(Verse 15) When the Spirit of God is poured out,

the desert will become like a fertile field.

The fruits of the Spirit will appear where there were none before.

(Verse 16) Justice will dwell in the desert

and righteousness in the field.

(Verse 17) The fruit of righteousness will be peace.

All this is a picture of what the society would be like

when God raises up a godly king to rule the land.

As with all prophecies there are a number of possibilities for fulfilment.

There would be an immediate fulfilment in young King Hezekiah himself,

when, in the next few chapters of Isaiah, in a last act of desperation,

he abandons his pragmatic political policies.

Having first rebelled against Sennacherib, the powerful Assyrian king

and then sought to appease him, without avail,

he finally cries out to God for healing and deliverance from his enemies.

There would be a partial fulfilment

when Judah returned from exile under Nehemiah and Ezra.

There would be a further fulfilment

when Jesus came to introduce the Kingdom of God.

And there will be a final fulfilment

when in the last days this earth is replaced with a new earth under Christ.

Ever since the creation of mankind God has been emphasising that He is a moral God
and has created a moral universe,

where good and evil co-exist until the final judgement day

when evil will finally be eradicated from earth and from heaven.

And in the process,

He will have created a people who will love him unconditionally

as he does them

and with whom he can dwell eternally.

In the beginning, God created man and woman,

but they were tempted by the devil and disobeyed God

and ate the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of Good & Evil.

From that point on they had a choice.

Either to obey God and do good
or to disobey and do evil.

By the time we get to Noah,
evil had reached such a pitch
that God considered abandoning his project
but God chose Noah and his family
and destroyed the rest of mankind in a flood.

In due course, God again chose one man, Abraham,
and chose to build a whole nation to demonstrate his ways.
And this is what he says about him in Genesis 18:19.
'I have chosen him so that he will direct his household and his children after him
to keep the way of the Lord by doing righteousness and justice

This verse is written in the context of a conversation between God and Abraham
regarding the destruction of the evil cities of Sodom & Gomorrah.
God wants to build a community characterised by his own values and priorities –
'righteousness'
and 'justice'.

In time God continues his plan when he rescues Abraham's descendants,
the children of Israel,
from oppression in Egypt
and brings them to Mount Sinai where he delivers the ten commandments
which spell out in more detail God's continuing priorities
of righteousness and justice.

Now here I want to break off for a few moments and look at something else.

Some time ago I read a book by Neale Donald Walsch
called 'Conversations with God',
and I have recently been reminded of it.

This looks like a Christian book.
It is published by Hodder & Stoughton,
a well-known Christian publisher.

But it is not about Christianity.
In fact it is New Age teaching,
but does not admit to being so.

In this book,
Walsch asks his god many questions
and his god answers them.
And when it comes to the ten commandments,
this is what Walsch's god says:
"There are no such things as the 'ten commandments'."
"Who would I command?
Myself?
And why would such commandments be required?"

Whatever I want is.

How is it necessary therefore to command anyone?" (*'Conversations with God' book 1, p95*)

Walsch's god then goes on to re-write and re-define the ten commandments
as the ten commitments,
removing and undermining their moral imperative.

In Walsch's universe we and god are one.

He is the creator,

but we are merely extensions of him.

Therefore whatever we are is what he is

and whatever he is we are.

So we end up defining god by our own behaviour and experience

and we become little gods.

Walsch's god is an amoral god

and has nothing to say to the real issues of good and evil

and life and death.

This is exactly the temptation at the Fall,

that we should become gods.

Except that in this case,

we can no longer know good and evil,

because they do not exist,

nor does the devil.

Hence there is no sin,

no repentance,

no salvation

and no hope.

This is not Christianity

and it is not true.

This is human imagination,

sponsored and encouraged by Satan to deceive those who seek God,

so that they do not find him.

They are encouraged to find a god in themselves and they do.

I introduce this here, because this kind of apparent spiritual thinking is creeping into the Christian church.

Superficially it sounds spiritual

and it appeals to the spirituality of decent men and women.

But this is not the God of whom Isaiah speaks.

It is not the God of Abraham

who seeks to build a community of His people

based upon righteousness and justice.

Indeed taken it to its logical conclusion,

New Age thinking provides no answers to the big questions, such as:

What is the meaning of life?

Where does evil come from?

Why is there injustice in the world?
Why is there so much cruelty in the world? - and
What can we do about it?

Christianity,
properly understood
answers all of these questions
and some of these answers can be found in the Book of the Prophet Isaiah,
which we are studying this evening.

So to return to Isaiah's king, we find in chapter 33, verse 22,
that Isaiah's King is indeed God himself:

"For the Lord is our judge;
The Lord is our lawgiver;
The Lord is our King,
It is he who will save us".

Isaiah is preaching to a people who have persistently disobeyed God,
who have added other false gods to their worship
and failed to put their trust in the God of righteousness and justice.
Hence they are liable to judgement unless they turn back to him.

This brings us to chapter 34,
where we learn, not for the first time,
that God is a God of judgement.

Judgement is not a comfortable subject.
Even the Lord himself finds it his 'strange work' and his 'alien task'. (Isaiah 28:21)
But it is a necessary part of justice.

Friday's Times carried an article
outlining proposals for changing the sentencing for murder.
We are all aghast when a drunken driver mows down a little girl on Christmas
morning after a heavy night of drinking
and gets a couple of years for dangerous driving,
while a 17-year old prostitute gets life for stabbing her pimp
after months of abuse and provocation.
We all support the idea of judgement,
but we want it to be fair and just.

We are appalled by the behaviour of modern day tyrants like Saddam Hussein
who without trial,
tortured and killed any whom he slightly suspected of opposing him.

We cringe at reports of Robert Mugabe,
whose current policy of bulldozing the shanty towns
in the cities of Zimbabwe,
because of their alleged opposition to his government,
is making thousands of poor people homeless in a once-rich country.

We cringe when we read in Isaiah of the judgement that God will bring upon the nations, such as Edom, Judah's neighbour
 who had been a constant thorn in their side.

And we wonder that a loving God could even allow,
 much less prescribe,
 such human suffering.

Indeed many are hindered from coming to faith
 by this apparent unseemly side of God's nature.

But this is how God is.

He is passionate in his condemnation of evil
 and his pursuit of righteousness and justice in his people.

This is the living, true and holy God who made us
 and who rules over all that he has made,
 who loves righteousness,
 who hates evil,
 but is gracious and merciful to all who seek his face.

Your alternative is the false god of Neale Donald Walsch,
 who exists only in the imagination of men
 and who condones everything you do
 as there are no standards,
 no good
 and no evil.

The Bible teaches us that sin is real
 and hence the punishment for sin has to be real too.
 Not only will the nations around Judah be punished,
 but so will Judah herself.

But the Bible also teaches us that God is a God of redemption.
 There is always a way back.

And so in Chapter 35 we see a picture of restoration.

I have said many times and will say it again.

“Our God is a restorative God”.

The whole ethos of Christianity is restoration.

Hence the final verse that we read this evening and we sang in one of our songs:
 “And the ransomed of the Lord will return.

They will enter Zion with singing; everlasting joy will crown their heads.”

And so this message rings out down the centuries.

First to the restoration of Judah after the exile to Babylon,
 then in the words of John the Baptist and of Jesus,
 and then to us in the 21st century
 where we are still beset by sin
 and need deliverance from the penalty that should be ours.

Jesus comes in all the humility of Bethlehem to save his people from their sins.
His healings and miracles demonstrate who he is.
You can recognise the words of this prophecy in Jesus' reply to John the Baptist in
Matthew 11:5. –
“The blind see, the deaf hear, the lame walk” and so on ...

And then to redeem us back to God
Christ underwent the judgement of God
as he paid the price of our sin
and literally bought us with his own blood
and drew us back as forgiven people into the arms of his Father in heaven.

We can know that restoration now,
but the final fulfilment will be when Jesus comes again
and we are raised to eternal life with Him
and shall know the joy of an eternity with God.

I pray that no-one here tonight
will miss out on this glorious fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecy.

May the Holy Spirit of God work in our hearts
and draw us ever closer to the living God
who gave his Son for each of us.

Amen.