

Isaiah 29 Sermon

Church on the Corner
Read v13-24

13 The Lord said:

Because these people draw near with their mouths
and honour me with their lips,
while their hearts are far from me,
and their worship of me is a human commandment learned by rote;

14 so I will again do

amazing things with this people,
shocking and amazing.

The wisdom of their wise shall perish,
and the discernment of the discerning shall be hidden.

15 Ha! You who hide a plan too deep for the Lord,
whose deeds are in the dark,
and who say, 'Who sees us? Who knows us?'

16 You turn things upside down!

Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?

Shall the thing made say of its maker,
'He did not make me';
or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,
'He has no understanding'?

17 Shall not Lebanon in a very little while
become a fruitful field,
and the fruitful field be regarded as a forest?

18 On that day the deaf shall hear
the words of a scroll,
and out of their gloom and darkness
the eyes of the blind shall see.

19 The meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord,
and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel.

20 For the tyrant shall be no more,
and the scoffer shall cease to be;
all those alert to do evil shall be cut off—

21 those who cause a person to lose a lawsuit,
who set a trap for the arbiter in the gate,
and without grounds deny justice to the one in the right.

22 Therefore thus says the Lord, who redeemed Abraham, concerning the house of Jacob:

No longer shall Jacob be ashamed,
no longer shall his face grow pale.

23 For when he sees his children,
the work of my hands, in his midst,
they will sanctify my name;
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.

24 And those who err in spirit will come to understanding,
and those who grumble will accept instruction.

Introduction

Can you think of a time when you knew that God was your only hope? A time when everything became clear. I often remember an experience of Hospital chaplaincy. Life and death. Everything had this vivid quality. Faith was the most important thing. But we live these muddled, compromised lives. Tempted to put our trust in all sorts of things that are not God.

Israel looked back on a time like that - Egypt.

v14 I will again do amazing things with this people, shocking and amazing.
The 'again' must refer to Exodus. The last time that God rescued his people. Shocking and amazing. - this is Gods plan for the world.

Context

We have skipped a section of Isaiah. Not because it is not important, but it all serves a specific purpose, and we are short of time. It is a series of *Oracles to the nations* - specific visions addressed to the surrounding nations of Israel (Tyre, Egypt, Moab, Babylon). Important but they serve a specific purpose for the people of God. That is - God will hold the nations to account. His kingdom is a global one. Justice is not just for Israel. But they serve another important purpose - don't put your trust in the power of the nations. Even through it all, trust in God.

Passage.

If this seems familiar again it should be -

Who quotes this and who to? Jesus to the pharisees.

Na so we are familiar with that criticism. v13 "these people draw near with their mouths and honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me"

That the hypocrisy of the pharisees, and of religious people like them was worrying more about outward appearances than the heart. More worried about looking good than being good. Worrying about status and perceived righteousness than actually doing right and being right. Hypocrite literally means actor. Important to remember but familiar.

However the passage in Isaiah gives a hugely important insight into what more Jesus was saying and what this actually means, and it is a bit of a shock.

To understand it, lets follow the flow of the passage.

1) v14 Wisdom and understanding are going to come to nothing

Wisdom is a beautiful thing. It is to be valued above almost anything.

But we need to hold it carefully. Wisely in fact. 1 Corinthians 3 "For the wisdom of this world is foolishness in God's sight."

But the problem with human wisdom is it can only see with a limited perspective.

*v16 or the thing formed say of the one who formed it,
Shall the potter be regarded as the clay?*

Shall the thing made say of its maker, 'He has no understanding'?

Wisdom without God is no wisdom at all. And all Human wisdom needs to be held with humility - because our perspective is limited.

So Why is wisdom going to come to nothing?

2) v16 You have things the wrong way up!

Have you ever seen a pinhole camera - the image is upside down. And our eyes are essentially the same. We need to use our brains to invert things.

“in God’s economy, we are the poorest of the poor; poorer than ever because we think ourselves rich. Our money and wealth is like the toy money in a children’s game: it may buy goods in our human economies that seem so powerful, but in the economy of God it is worthless.” ++Justin Welby

v17 Shall not Lebanon in a very little while become a fruitful field.

The Country of Lebanon was historically synonymous with the Mt Lebanon range. 170 mile long of rugged forested mountain ridge. Could it be a fruitful field?

What seems impossible isn’t for God. No more than what he is actually talking about.

v18-19 The deaf shall hear and the blind shall see. The last shall be first

v20-21 the corrupt and the tyrant will be no more.

This has already begun. The kingdom of God is at hand. You who have seen the light of the kingdom of God, don’t fall back in step with those walking in darkness.

But the question of empty religion - has a specific point.

So given all that - what does empty religion look like?

So the problem is Ch30v1

*Oh, rebellious children, says the Lord,
who carry out a plan, but not mine;
who make an alliance, but against my will,
adding sin to sin;
2 who set out to go down to Egypt
without asking for my counsel,
to take refuge in the protection of Pharaoh,
and to seek shelter in the shadow of Egypt;*

What is the worldly wisdom that is coming to nothing? It is believing the illusion of power. trusting in man, Playing political games, making allegiances setting one great empire against another, trusting in the might of armies. Making friends with those who seem strong might seem like a way to secure your future. It really isn’t.

The most pertinent example of this right now is the continuing attempt by a significant subset of US Christians to secure religious freedom by political power brokering.

And these things will all fail us. Isaiah 36 *“I know you are depending on Egypt, that splintered reed of a staff, which pierces the hand of anyone who leans on it!”*

That is what empty religion looks like - you say you trust in God, but really you are making an allegiance in Egypt.

But stark as that is, we need to be self aware too.

So how do we *“honour me with their lips, while their hearts are far from me”*

Is not just empty religion for show.

It is saying we trust in God while in reality we trust in human resources.

It is worshipping God, while in reality worshipping power and influence, wealth and fame.

Only by putting in your trust in God can your future amount to anything.

What are the splintered staff that you are relying on?

What is it that is piercing your hand?

There can be many things - and you need to answer this for yourself. But it is interesting as things in our society are shaken that our confidence is too.

Does my optimism about the world disappearing as the value of the pound slides. Really? We are called as Christians to be politically engaged, to fight for justice and righteousness. But not to put our trust in politics.

Or is my hope in houses and property? Am I drawn to news stories about the property market?

Remember - you know that God is turning the world upside down.

What seems like wisdom isn’t anything of the sort.

This is the wisdom of God

Take sides with the poor.

Face up to the corrupt without fear.

Pray. Give. Fast.

Why? For these are the things that have value in the coming kingdom. Store up treasure in heaven

Lets not be those who honour God with our lips but our hearts are far from them. Because our hearts are not strong enough to do this by ourselves. Leaning on a staff that spinners under our weight. Or lean on the one who can bear all things, one who holds the future in his hands. One who is doing shocking and amazing things. And honour the name of the Lord, and stand in awe like the children of Israel who saw what God was doing.

*v23 they will sanctify my name;
they will sanctify the Holy One of Jacob,
and will stand in awe of the God of Israel.*

If you rely on the splintering staff, and you will come to nothing, just as they will.