

Isaiah 43 Sermon

Church on the Corner 6th November 2016

1 But now thus says the Lord,
he who created you, O Jacob,
he who formed you, O Israel:
Do not fear, for I have redeemed you;
I have called you by name, you are mine.
2 When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.
3 For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.
I give Egypt as your ransom,
Ethiopia[a] and Seba in exchange for you.
4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.
5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away
and my daughters from the end of the earth—
7 everyone who is called by my name,
whom I created for my glory,
whom I formed and made.'

Introduction

I believe in the future. Though I admit my confidence has been shaken.
I believe that God has plans for our world and he hasn't given up on it.
The kingdom of God is at hand. And each of you has a part to play in that.

So don't let fear or anger get to you. Don't be defined by the bad things that have happened in the past. Or times when you have been disappointed, or have failed.

It is really important to learn from our history. But much of what we do is just let bad experience define us. We haven't learned from it, we are haunted by it and become disillusioned.

Fear not. This is a Beautiful passage, some of the most tender words in the whole Bible to the people of God.

v1 *Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.*

v4 *Because you are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you,*

Hear these words when times are hard. they are for you as much as they were for the original hearers.

They speak of your Identity, Who you are is not defines by your achievements or you status. You are a child of God.

They speak of your calling You are called by name. You do what your father does. Do justice, love mercy.

They speak of your Redemption - Redemption is a word from the slave market - to redeem someone is to buy back their freedom.

They speak of Relationship - you are mine says the Lord. You are precious in my sight, and honoured, and I love you.

This is the foundation you are invited to build your life upon. This, not the past, not your failures or disappointments is what defines you, if you will allow it to.

Hear this invitation from God. Say yes to it.

Context. In some ways that may be all you need to hear, but as ever, understanding the original context makes that truth even more dramatic.

v3 give the clue.

*For I am the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour.*

I give Egypt as your ransom

We take that word saviour for granted. But Saviour means rescuer. When you are stuck by the side of the road in the middle of the night, afraid and alone. I am the one you call and I will come and get you.

So where are the people of God lost in the dark, afraid and alone? v14 "*For your sake I will send to Babylon and break down all the bars*"

It is a picture of the Babylonian exile. They are refugees, exiles in an alien land.

Can you imagine what it would be like to be forcibly taken from your home land. Living as captives, slaves in an alien land. If you know the story of Daniel - that is the same exile.

Jerusalem is overrun, the young, educated and influential are taken away to Babylon for two reasons - to stop an uprising in Jerusalem by removing all the potential leaders. And to enrich the Babylonian society, with learning and culture.

And God says to these exiles - do not be afraid. Though you feel lost and alone, far from home. You are mine. I am your God and your saviour.

When we are uprooted our sense of ourselves gets lost. Moving to the big city can do this to you. There is a freedom to it, but also a danger. Many have been swept away on that torrent. God says - Remember who you are. Hold on to your identity.

And this is a reminder of how hard life can be.

We tend to think that Gods love for us means that everything will be okay. And when things go wrong, then our sense of Gods love is shaken.

But that was never the promise of Scripture.

v2 *When you pass through the waters, I will be with you;
and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you;
when you walk through fire you shall not be burned,
and the flame shall not consume you.*

God does not say I will save you from these things. He says I will walk with you, and you will not be overcome. The mark of a christian is not the absence of hardship, it is courage under fire, endurance, even joy in the midst. I will walk with you. Reach out your hand because you are not alone.

Now this is a powerful image for what it would be like. As you inhabit a Godless culture it will feel overwhelming - like passing through a fast flowing river that will sweep you away. Have you ever done that - forded a fast flowing stream? It is amazing how powerful the water is. If you ever have to do it take something to lean on otherwise you will get swept away. That is a really good metaphor for our culture. Don't get swept away.

Or walking through the fire of pride and anger, selfishness, greed and ambition - all that stuff that burns people up and reduces lives to ashes.

God Says lean on me, I am your shelter and your strength.

And God says - don't forget me, because I certainly won't forget you.

*v4 Because you are precious in my sight,
and honoured, and I love you,
I give people in return for you,
nations in exchange for your life.*

One of the strongest themes in Isaiah is how God used the nations to fulfil his purposes. Egypt is a tool in my hands he says.

But the picture of Ransom it foreshadows the Cross. The greatest act of rescue in History.

2 Timothy "Christ Jesus, who gave Himself as a ransom for all"

I have redeemed you, I have bought your freedom. God gave not just nations, but his own son to win you back.

Oh, and an important question about hermeneutics. How do we actually know this is about us, and not just the ancient Hebrew exiles?

Preachers have a tendency to apply Old Testament bible passages to modern audiences rather haphazardly. But we actually have permission here.

And we know this is about us because the vision takes a surprising turn in v5

*"5 Do not fear, for I am with you;
I will bring your offspring from the east,
and from the west I will gather you;
6 I will say to the north, 'Give them up',
and to the south, 'Do not withhold;
bring my sons from far away"*

I thought we are talking about the Babylon exile which was in the East. Where did the North, South and west come in?

They didn't understand this. But you do.

*18 Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.
19 I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.*

Isaiah's Vision is not just about the Babylonian exile, it is a picture of the new thing that God is doing, and is still doing. He is not rebuilding what was, it is a whole new thing. What is the new thing?

It is a new creation, the renewal of heaven and earth. And it has started.

God calls his children from every corner of the world.

Every tribe and tongue.

In Christ he redeems not just the Babylonian exiles, but all of us exiled from God, far from home and sends message to the ends of the earth - come home.

So believe in the future. Our best days are not behind us, they are ahead.

Conclusion

So my question for you is. What is your part in this?

Our Advent project this year is going to be to ask ourselves this question. What am I called to this year? What is my cause, my one thing.

Apart from work, church, friends - what is my advent project.

Advent of course isn't just about waiting for Christmas. It means arrival, and it is a distinct church season about the kingdom of God.

And the themes have all been flagged up in Isaiah.

Justice, mercy, peace, poverty, environment, community, compassion.

What is God laying on your heart? What is the cause that raises your heart rate?

It may be something you have cared about for a long time, it may be a new thing.

You are called to be part of this new thing.

To make a contribution to it. To act, to educate, to serve, to raise awareness, to protest, to pray. It may just be a small thing. But God takes all these small things and uses them to build his future..

Do not be defined by the past.

Do not let fear paralyse you.

When you walk through the raging torrent or the fire, reach out your hand. For God walks with you.

Believe in the future.