

ISAIAH; PROPHET OF HOLINESS

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Sermon 10th August.

True Religion: Isaiah 1:1, 10-20

Introduction: Isaiah 1:1 God says: I reared children but they have rebelled against me. How did they get to be like this?

When the Hebrews entered the land of Canaan (now Israel of course), they met with people living settled lives in cities and farms. Canaan was prosperous, sophisticated, with imported goods from all over the world, and with vineyards that exported wines to other countries. All this we know from archaeology.

The Hebrews under Joshua conquered Canaan. God gave this land to his people because he had passed judgment on the Canaanites for their idol worship and practices that we would call foul, obscene, or inhuman. The Hebrews had only known a nomadic life in the desert, but they brought with them the Law of Moses, telling them how to live and prosper as God's people. However the Canaanites who were left in the land said: Our gods give us good crops and prosperity – if you don't worship our gods, especially Baal, the fertility god, your crops will fail. So began dual worship, observing feast days and sacrifices as Moses had taught, but also making offerings to the Canaanite gods.

You see what happened – the worship of God became an appeasement – keep him on our side – just as idol worship was designed to keep the gods pleased with the people, so that they would prosper. Religion became a sham, an elaborate system of sacrifices and sacred ceremonies. The worship of idols led to a breakdown of moral standards – the laws were disregarded – for instance, Isaiah condemns the priests, who were so drunk they vomited over the sacred furniture. Under the Law of Moses, priests were forbidden to drink fermented wine. The legal system had been corrupted – judges took bribes and found in favour of the rich. The poor could never obtain justice. The poor were being ground into the dust, heavily indebted, and sold as slaves. The Law of Moses provided that nobody among God's people should be destitute. There were prophets who took money to give messages that the people wanted to hear. Religion had become nauseating to God.

It is thought that money was introduced about the 8th century B.C., replacing the ancient barter system. Money led to all kinds of social evils. Greed, corruption, avarice, injustice, murder.

The Prophets – God Sent the Prophets

The people had to learn that God wanted obedience to his will and not sacrifice as a substitute for it. Isaiah poured scorn upon the sacrificial system upon which the Hebrews had set such store. Repentance was easy for them, since sacrifice would atone for any sin and with one voice the prophets condemned so cheap and hypocritical a religion. But they killed the prophets, didn't they! And stoned the messengers God sent – as Jesus said when he wept over Jerusalem.

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God's Judgment: 10-20: distaste to revulsion!

To be called Sodom was virtually charge and sentence in one. Isaiah is backed up by the prophet Ezekiel who said that Jerusalem was even more depraved than Sodom! You would think that the people would be shocked. Sodom to us is like Pompeii or Hiroshima – a disaster site. Of all the prophetic outbursts against the evils perpetrated by God's people and their false worship, this is the most powerful and sustained. It is more vehement even than Amos, who called a spade a spade, fearlessly, and stood up to the High Priest of Israel. First the offerings are rejected - then the offerers, vv. 11,12, and God's tone sharpens from distaste to revulsion. At last there comes a specific accusation - in the final lurid phrase of v.15 Your hands are full of blood. Repentance must be fully practical 16-17, and fully personal 18-20. Come now and let us reason together – reminiscent of the law courts – God must have frank confrontation. Note how God can "change the unchangeable" and "delete the indelible" – the scarlet and crimson were fast colours.

The climax of the passage comes in relief: the great offer of salvation in vv. 18-20. God did not want to condemn or destroy his people. He offered full forgiveness and pardon if they would only repent, put away evil, strive to do right and obey his word. All through the book of Isaiah the prophet is calling people back to the true worship of God, to holy living. Time and time again he brings God's messages of love, where God shows a longing for his people to be reconciled to him – and promises peace and prosperity – but they would not !!

Why did God say V. 20 "If you resist and rebel, you will be devoured by the sword"? God was not prepared to tolerate flagrant evils in a society that persisted in rejecting his holy laws. Not only so, but they insisted on making unholy alliances with other nations and rejected the promises of God that if they trusted him, he would save them from their enemies. They incurred their own destruction – Judah fell to the Babylonians in 586 B.C. with dreadful suffering. Read Lamentations – most depressing – graphic account of suffering and slaughter when Jerusalem fell.

Application: is there a lesson in all of this? For us?

Have you ever wondered why there is so much emphasis on sin, in the Prayer Book? Sin in our lives will cause God to turn away from our prayers. Sin blocks our access to God. If we want to worship him in spirit and in truth, to know and enjoy his presence, we must repent, turn away from our sins. The Bible describes sin as "disobedience" to God. Preferring our own way, doing what we want instead of what we know to be God's way. I suggest that we all need to pray for guidance to see what it is in our lives that is not pleasing to God.

I ask: is it possible that we live in a sinful society and have become so immured

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in sin that we no longer recognise it for what it is? What about TV? Recently I have been offended by what I see as a trend in profanity – using the name of Jesus Christ as an expletive, and with offensive adjectives. I can never watch Michael Douglas

again after his use of the name of Jesus Christ with a foul adjective, and he gave it everything he had. Should we watch murder as entertainment? Crime?

A Word from Jesus

In Luke 12 Jesus has the answer for false worship – he warns his followers that if our hearts are treasuring earthly things, then our hearts will be enslaved to such things. Jesus promises a special blessing of his presence and care for those who in full readiness and faithfulness wait and watch for our Lord's return. Sounds other-worldly, doesn't it?

In our Hebrews reading the OT saints were very much "other-worldly" – they died in the faith that God had something better in store for them – eternal life in a heavenly homeland- this also is the Christian hope.

The Word and the World: Conclusion

I do believe the best way to live a life pleasing to God, enjoying his company and blessings, is to love and immerse ourselves in the Word. God spoke to the prophets and he will speak to us today – the Word of God is given to guide us through this life and to prepare us for the next! A church that promotes the word of God will flourish, whereas if we neglect to read the Word the church will wither on the vine. If you're not reading the Word, may I suggest that you open the Word, not as if you're reading a novel, but expecting to meet God in the pages. You might start with the Psalms.

Another point I'd like to make – the prophets saw God as the God of the nations – do we? When we hear of wars and rumours of wars, are we afraid? Do we trust in God to work out his purposes in a world where power-hungry tyrants are making war on others? Read on – in Chapter 2 Isaiah foresees a time when God's rule will be established over all the earth. Jesus is coming again, bringing justice and righteousness.

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