

Isaiah 35:1 to 10 9.30 am 2016

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of our hearts be acceptable to you O Lord our strength and our redeemer.  
Amen

In our reading from Isaiah, Isaiah is prophesying about the coming of the Lord about 700 years before the event.

Isaiah's prophesy, or vision, is that people will know when the Lord arrives because they will not only see his splendour, but also his power, and the very country side will blossom at his coming.

The desert he says will rejoice and where there has been barren land in a wilderness for centuries there will be flowers in bloom. And the desert will sing with the birds and insects that will colonise the fertile land.

Whereas the desert is monotonous in its brown lifeless scenery it will be transformed and will challenge the very beauty of the Lebanon Mountains and be as fertile as the fields of Carmel and Sharon, or as we would say as fertile as Kent, the garden of England.

In the 1950's our queen and Prince Philip visited RAF Odiham; it was a great day for the RAF and for the local area, some of my friends took time off and went to see her.

The queen arrived by train to one of the local stations, and if I remember correctly it was fleet and the roads between the station and the RAF base had all the hedges trimmed.

The verges were cut and flowers planted in the hedgerows, all in bloom, the road from the station to the RAF base had never looked so splendid. I'm reminded what someone said a few months ago, that wherever the queen goes she smells fresh paint.

Isaiah is saying that God will do the same when his Messiah comes except that God will transform deserts, indeed, God will transform the whole world, not just roadside verges.

For me Isaiah's picture of joy and beauty sums up the birth of our Lord, because Jesus didn't come in judgement and wrath he came in love and joy.

At Jesus' birth an angel of the Lord came to some shepherds tending their sheep in a field and said to them, "Don't be afraid! I am here with good news for you, which will bring great joy to all people."

Isaiah's overriding vision of the coming of the Messiah was one of great joy where not only would the people rejoice, but the very earth would rejoice.

If being a Christian doesn't bring you great joy then there is something wrong; if I were to try and sum up one reason why I'm a Christian it's because Jesus brings me great joy.

Good friends are people you can rely on to bring you joy, and we have no better friend than Jesus, because he is by far the best and most reliable friend we will ever have, who will also help us when we need it; and Jesus' joy is when we turn to him.

My experience is that Jesus can be relied upon never to let us down, even when we've disappointed him he still stays with us giving us another chance.

My joy is not based on a shallow acquaintance, but based on a lifetime experience of friendship and love. I've come to realise through the years that Jesus truly loves me, indeed he loves all of us, and he even gave up his life for us.

As the hymn goes, "What a friend we have in Jesus, all our sins and grief to bear!"

We need to turn to Jesus in prayer when things get too difficult, or we are at our wits end, and indeed when we are also experiencing great joy.

Jesus doesn't want to be excluded he wants to be included.

So take your problems and your concerns to him in prayer; and when the problem or concern has gone away remember to thank him, because like us he likes to hear the good news as well.

But Isaiah says that there will be other benefits when the Lord comes, he says, that the Lord will strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees, those who have fearful hearts will be made strong.

Is that not our experience; do we not get strength from the Lord, I certainly do, of course we do, I am here through his grace. As St Paul said, He is our strength and our shield.

Isaiah then goes on to prophesy that the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped, but of course Isaiah wasn't only talking about physical sight and hearing, but also of spiritual sight and spiritual hearing.

Isaiah was saying that when the Lord comes he would demonstrate his power by opening the eyes that are blind.

And our reading from Matthews gospel gives a summary of Jesus' spiritual and physical healing, which people, would swarm to him to obtain, because normally people would have to endure their illnesses for a life time.

Isaiah is telling us that our eyes will also be opened to the true nature of God when we surrender to Jesus, because as Jesus said when you've seen me you've seen God.

What's more, Isaiah predicts that the good news that the Lord will reveal will make the lame leap like a deer and the tongues of the speechless will sing for joy.

And again, the very earth will be moved because waters shall break forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert; the burning sand will become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water.

Those words remind me of the account in Exodus when the children of Israel were escaping from the Egyptians and travelling in the desert for forty years to freedom in the promised land.

Here Isaiah may well be alluding to the freedom that we will get when the Lord comes, the freedom for us will be from the burden of sin and death, because we have escaped from all that and have found our true home in the Lord.

Ask the average black South African what the end of apartheid meant to him and he may well say the joy of freedom from oppression.

Nelson Mandela also said, "To be free is not merely to cast off one's chains, but to live in a way that respects and enhances the freedom of others". It's a pity other world leaders don't think like Nelson Mandela.

We now come to verse 8 possibly the climax of Isaiah's vision or prophecy; verses 1 to 7 have been leading up to the climax of verse 8. Verse 8 reads, "A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way".

The Holy Way was engineered and built by the Lord when he came. He didn't use skilled engineers to help him build it; he used ordinary folk like fishermen and tax collectors.

It's called a highway because it is grander than an ordinary road. The Romans built roads wherever they went; they invariably built them straight and higher than the surrounding landscape so that they had plenty of warning of possible attack.

Roman highways were higher and grander than ordinary roads. The Holy Way that Jesus built is higher and grander than even the Roman roads.

We don't have to pay a toll to travel on the Holy Way; all we need is faith in the saving power of our Lord Jesus Christ. Faith will get us travelling along the Holy Way.

And Isaiah says that no traveller, not even fools shall go astray.

There will be travellers with a deep faith in the saving power of Jesus but if you asked them to explain their faith they would probably have difficulty. Incidentally the word fool doesn't appear in the Greek and I would prefer the word humble.

You see God was kind to humble people like us we don't have to be theologians to be saved all we need is faith. Thomas A Kempis summed it up for me when he wrote, "I would rather feel contrition than try and define the word".

Isaiah goes on to say that if we stay on the Holy Way we will be safe from lions and wild beasts. In other words if we stay faithful to Christ then ultimately the Devil will not be able to touch us.

The Devil can go anywhere in the world but he can't travel on the Holy Way because the only way on to the Holy Way is through faith in Christ, there is no other way to get on.

Isaiah is of course speaking in parables because the holy way is our own life's journey of faith, and if we stay faithful to Christ the devil is ultimately powerless against us.

This Holy Way of course goes from earth to heaven and instead of hearing noisy traffic on the Holy Way we shall only hear songs of joy and laughter coming from God's people who are travelling on it.

And the last verse from Isaiah prophesy reads, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return, and come to Zion with singing: everlasting joy shall be upon their heads: they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away".

Zion of course is a metaphor for the city of the living God, the New Jerusalem, Revelation 21, and the ransomed of the Lord refers to those who Christ has saved, those who have been redeemed, those who have run the race, completed the course, and stayed faithful to Christ to the end of their lives.

As we sit let us pray:-

You came, Lord Jesus in Joy, to teach us the way of life that you require, to show us how we are to serve you and our neighbours with joy; make us receptive to your teaching and to your gospel, and help us to live a life of service to you without counting the cost, to your glory.

Amen