

Isaiah 1 Sermon

Church on the Corner 2016

There are two images from the last couple of years that are burned onto our cultural conscience. - Alan Kurdi - 3 year old Syrian boy who's body was washed up on a Turkish beach two years ago this week. And five-year-old Omran Daqneesh - 5 year old boy sitting in the back of an ambulance in Aleppo who survived a Russian airstrike which destroyed his home

Both force us to confront the question. What is wrong with the world?

Introduction

This term we are taking a deep breath and diving into the awesome book of Isaiah. Awesome in its scale and scope. It is the story of the decline and fall of a nation - and not just any nation. And the reimagining, or perhaps the revelation of what it means to be the people of God.

It matters a great deal. Obviously it is one of the great books of the Old Testament. But more than that it is one of the books that set the stage for what is to come. Jesus sitting in the temple as a young man discussing with the scribes and teachers of the law would have pored over this text. He quotes it more than any other.

This book would have clarified for him the heart of his mission. Eg the suffering servant passage in Isaiah 53 a very different view of what it means to be the Messiah.

And it addresses some fundamental questions. What is God's role in the world? How does he answer for the suffering and injustice that is so widespread. How can God allow this to happen?

Genre

In terms of the writing style, this is not familiar territory. We are pretty good at dealing with historical narrative like the gospels or much of the old Testament, we know what to do with epistle - NT Letters.

But this is a different type of writing all together - it is prophesy. Not in terms of telling the future (although it does speak of the future) But rather God speaking into history And is a form of writing that we need to work harder at understanding and applying - particularly important to understand it properly before applying it to ourselves or to the church.

It is unusual because it is not particularly a chronological book - it is a series of vision and it is Shakespearean in the quality and the sophistication of its writing.

v1 *The vision of Isaiah son of Amoz, which he saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem in the days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*

It is the story of an era in the history of Israel, over the reigns of 4 kings - in the latter days of this once great nation.

Written by Isaiah - son of Amos. We don't know much about him other than what we find here. We will get to know him better as the story unfolds, but for now we can say, he is a royal prophet - he is a political who works within the royal courts and has the ear of the king, but one who stands in critique of those in charge.

Who is it written for?

2 *Hear, O heavens, and listen, O earth;*

for the Lord has spoken:

The audience is a cosmic one - the heavens and the earth.

For the sake of people through history, for the angels themselves, and for you and me.

And it is a story in vindication of God.

*v2b I reared children and brought them up,
but they have rebelled against me.*

Because the question on everyone's lips is how could this befall the people of God. How could Israel come to this

Hear the word of the Lord. This is God speaking about History - about his own Story.

This is a divine drama, played out for a cosmic audience. The stage is Israel, the players are the people of God, its scope is a lifetime, its story 4 kings, and the fall of a nation. It is written for you and me and all people throughout history and the very heavens themselves.

So this vision begins with a picture of the nation broken. This is the end of the story

*v7 Your country lies desolate,
your cities are burned with fire;
in your very presence
aliens devour your land;
it is desolate, as overthrown by foreigners.*

The book begins with the end. And to the original readers of this story - the end would have been familiar. They would have known the state of Israel. The question was 'why has God let this happen.

Like modern day Syria people look with horror at what they have become.

v10-16 Lays out a whole series of things which are a critique of their worship and their religion.

v11 What to me is the multitude of your sacrifices?

*says the Lord;
I have had enough of burnt-offerings of rams
and the fat of fed beasts;
I do not delight in the blood of bulls,
or of lambs, or of goats.*

The flaws of the sacrificial system? It is used as a reason for not using incense in worship or not having religious festivals. But that is fundamentally missing the point.

There is something about these people, that even when they turn to God, even when in **v15-17**

*When you stretch out your hands,
I will hide my eyes from you;
even though you make many prayers,
I will not listen;*

What is the problem? The answer is in v15-17

*your hands are full of blood.
16 Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean;
remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, v17 learn to do good;
seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.*

It shouldn't be, but it is a surprise to find that the critique of the people of God is not primarily about faith or doctrine, but about how they treat people.

They think they are rich, but they are poor

*22 Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.*

*23 Your princes are rebels
and companions of thieves.*

*Everyone loves a bribe
and runs after gifts.*

*They do not defend the orphan,
and the widow's cause does not come before them.*

But Isaiah says that Your silver has become dross,
your wine is mixed with water.

Silver represents their riches - and the riches of the people of God is not primarily financial, but justice and the righteousness of the city.

And wine represents life - The life of that place was that it was a place where the character of God was lived out among the people.

The calling of these people - the reason God established Israel was that they were to be a city on a hill, a great nation that displayed the character of God through the way that they lived.

Psalms 72 says that the king of Israel would be the one who would defend the cause of the poor and punish the wrongdoer.

And when that has gone - its does not matter how much worship is there and whether that worship is correct. Worship is redundant because the people of God are failing to be the people they are called to be and to serve his purposes on Earth.

So he turns his face away from them.

Could that be any clearer? The anger of the Lord is roused not primarily by their faithlessness, but by their Corruption, thievery and exploitation of the vulnerable.

And it is uncomfortable reading isn't it. For we live in a world where the vulnerable are still exploited, the orphans are still undefended, the refugee is still exploited.

Sin is not just the little things. Of course they matter, but when we make sin out to be about those things we feel guilty about things we make God seem rather petty. Sin is also all of the systemic and institutional corruption that we are actually complicit in but rarely feel any responsibility for. Sin is this whole unjust world where poor lives are treated as worthless.

Where refugees are seen as less than human. Of bribery where we accept the benefits of an economic system that exploits the poor in return for our silence.

Of demanding cheap consumer goods and closing our eyes to the exploitation of those who manufacture it. Our guilt is not just because of what we have done, but because of what we have not done, and what we have remained silent about, and what we are complicit in by our lifestyle.

Uncomfortable though it is Isaiah confronts us with a much bigger picture of what is wrong with the world. And we are part of the problem.

Yet in the middle of all this the promise of Grace still remains.

*18 Come now, let us argue it out,
says the Lord:*

*though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be like snow;
though they are red like crimson, they shall become like wool.*

The character of God is such that even in the midst of his anger, there is always the promise of mercy. In the midst of judgement there is always hope.

And this stamens is in some ways a statement of the purpose of the whole book - the intention of God is that he would recreate his people as the people he created them to be.

*27 Zion shall be redeemed by justice,
and those in her who repent, by righteousness.*

That is where the book of Isaiah is going to take us - how God remakes his people - no longer as a nation with borders and strict cultural and racial identity. But a people made up of every tribe, race and language, who inhabit the whole earth. And it is a story that we find ourselves caught up in. We are that people of God.

Conclusion

We imagine this tension between the anger of God against sin and at the same time his mercy and his grace and that is actually a beautiful picture of the nature of God. That is what he is like.

God is a God of judgement - we don't like to talk about this - we the want to emphasise the grace of God and the length he goes to redeem sinners on the cross. Like Aslan in Narnia "He is not a tame lion"

God cares about the whole of life. It is a terrible mistake to think that God is only interested in religion - he is outraged that they have become a nation that oppresses the poor and abuses the venerable and the voiceless.

Also we tend to get caught up as Christians with patterns of worship. True worship isn't simply about turn towards God. True worship turns our hearts into God's heart - aligns our hearts with God "a man after God's own heart". Do we find ourselves caring about the things that God cares about. Is there a growing compassion for the marginalised and the poor?

17 learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.

This book is going to challenge our response to poverty and injustice. and equip us better to be the people of God in this world.

So hear the word of the Lord.