

The Arrival and the End

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Date: 23 May 1999

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 23rd of May 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled The Arrival and the End and is from Isaiah chapter 66 verses 1 to 24. Let's pray and ask God to help us, not only in understanding but also in keeping his word.

God, we thank you that you have spoken through your prophet Isaiah so many centuries ago. And we pray that you may speak to us through him tonight.

Not only fill our minds with truth, but give us wills to obey it and hearts to keep it.

And we pray this for Jesus' glory. Amen. When do you think that you are closest to God?

[1 : 1 8] When do you think that you are closest to God? I suspect that for many people they would give a church type answer. In a church building, I've often heard it said by many, many people over the years that somehow being in a building like this or another old building, usually with stained glass windows, somehow makes me feel closer to God.

Or some of us might say with communion. Or some of us might say, well, singing hymns. Or some others of us might say, well, singing modern Christian choruses. Some people would say, well, turn the lights dim and have some sort of endless Enya type Christian music in the background.

And then I feel closest to God. One of our great desires, I think, is to be intimate with God. To draw closer to him.

I think that desire is expressed in the way that Christian music is advertised. The melodies on this CD are sweet and refreshing, drawing you in to honour and adore the Lord more.

Or take another one. This embracing style will inspire and uplift you as he draws your heart into the abundant love of God.

[2 : 4 7] Or another CD was advertised with the invitation to experience face-to-face intimacy and intimate worship of God.

And all that for just \$29.95 plus post and packaging. Let me warn you that religious type answers are dangerous to that question.

When are we closest to God? If your answer is along the lines of church, communion, music, or atmosphere, or stained glass windows, or cold buildings, then your answer is, I think, dangerous.

Ancient Israel in the 8th century BC, 2700 years ago and more, was a very religious nation.

They prized their temple. That is their church building extraordinary, in a sense, in the centre of the nation. And they gloried in their religiousness.

[4 : 0 0] They gloried in their offerings of sacrifices, and so on. And they were very devout people. And they were pleased to offer many sacrifices to God and to go up to their temple, and so on.

Surely, if you went to the temple as God commanded, and surely if you offered all the sacrifices and more that God commanded, you would be very close to God.

Especially because they believed that somehow God dwelt in the heart of the temple. So being in the building and offering the sacrifices God demanded, must surely make you intimate with God.

But an outward veneer of virtue, an outward facade of faith, does not fool God.

Ever. You see, the person who, with a proud heart, offers the sacrifices that are commanded, is actually doing something obnoxious, vile, and offensive before God.

[5 : 08] That's what verses 3 and 4 are saying, in the most extraordinary way. Whoever slaughters an ox, that is, a person who makes a sacrifice of an ox, as commanded by the Old Testament sacrificial laws, is like one who kills a human being.

Like one who commits murder, that is. You see, if your heart is wrong, if your heart is unclean, then any sacrifice you offer God is unclean, and you may as well go commit murder.

You're no better off than a murderer in the sight of God. Isn't that extraordinary language? Isn't that shocking language? And that's Isaiah's point.

To shock religious people out of their complacency. To make them realise where they stand with God. Whoever sacrifices a lamb is like one who breaks a dog's neck.

Whoever presents a grain offering is like one who offers swine's blood, the most obnoxious, abominable food, or linked to food, thing that you can get for an ancient Jew.

[6 : 22] God is saying that if your heart is unclean, that doesn't matter what external obedience you offer, doesn't matter how religious you are, how frequently you attend the temple, how many sacrifices you offer, you might as well be a murderer.

That's the way God looks at you. They're scandalous words for an ancient Israelite. It's very inflammatory in its style.

It's hard to imagine Isaiah being popular when he spoke those words to his fellow Israelites. If you think that by being here tonight makes you close to God, think again.

If you think that somehow by singing the songs that we sing tonight makes you closer to God, think again. If somehow you think that being here week by week makes you closer to God, think again.

Because empty churchiness is vile and repugnant to God. See, God is no caged animal. He's not kept in a little church box that we might go and pat him week by week or poke at him and say, what a nice little fellow you are.

[7 : 47] God is not a tame pet. He is the sovereign Lord of the universe. He's not there for us to approach when we feel like it. Verses 1 and 2 make that very clear.

Thus says the Lord, heaven is my throne and the earth is my footstool. What is the house that you would build for me?

And what is my resting place? The words are almost mocking about the temple. Not that the temple is a bad thing, you see. But if all your concentration and thinking about being close to God is focused on a building, the temple and its sacrifices, then you're up the spout.

God's bigger, you see. God is Lord of the universe. He's not a caged animal in a temple. All these things my hand has made, he says, and so all these things are mine, says the Lord.

If God is not a caged animal, where is his home? Verse 2 goes on to tell us, but this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, the one who trembles at my word.

[9 : 19] You see, intimacy with God is not about religious duty. It's not about ritualism. It's not about mood or atmosphere or building or place. Intimacy with God is about the state of our heart, a humble heart or spirit.

That is one that is dependent upon God. The one that is not self-reliant, but reliant upon God for all. The one that is not boastful about one's own achievements or religiosity, but one that is thoroughly dependent upon Almighty God.

The contrite heart or spirit. The one that is repentant. The one that acknowledges one's own failures and sins and seeks mercy and forgiveness.

The one who trembles at God's word. Who has fear at the God whose word it is. The one who does not handle God's word lightly and then go and commit flagrant sin.

It is in such a one as this that God's sanctuary is found. To such a one as this there is intimacy, real intimacy with God.

[10 : 49] In the 16th century, in Europe and the United Kingdom, the Reformation occurred. The Reformation was a period of church reform.

The fiercest opponents of the reformers were, ironically, so-called fellow Christians, so-called fellow believers in Jesus Christ.

In the early part of the 16th century, there were brutal and vicious wars in Switzerland. Religious wars between people who claimed to be Christian.

Papal Rome was harsh in its response to the Reformation. Queen Mary I of England in her brief five-year reign in the 1550s.

was brutal in her execution of faithful Christians. Though she herself, of course, claimed to be a Christian.

[12 : 00] You see, persecution most often is fiercest from within. From those who claim also to be believers in Jesus Christ.

Persecution is often the most vicious from within one's own kindred or even family. You see, life will not be easy for the humble of heart.

And that is Isaiah's warning here to those who are humble and contrite of heart. He warns them that they face inevitable persecution.

verse 5, hear the word of the Lord, you who tremble at his word, that is to the humble and contrite in heart. And what's God speaking to them?

Words of warning. Your own people who hate you, fellow Israelites for them that is, who hate you and reject you for my name's sake, have said, let the Lord be glorified so that we may see your joy.

[13 : 08] They're mocking the faith, they're mocking the humility, they're mocking the contrition of God's faithful people. And Isaiah is warning them that this will happen.

He's warning them of inevitable persecution. You see, truth is not always popular, and not least with people who claim to be within God's family. The same thing occurs today.

The staunchest critics of the gospel today are liberal Christians. They're not pagans, they're people who claim to be within the church, but they are the fiercest opponents.

They are the ones who persecute those who hold fast to the Christian gospel and biblical truth. Stephen, the first Christian martyr, stoned to death according to Acts chapter 7.

was persecuted by his fellow Israelites. And in his speech before his stoning, he quoted these words from this chapter, or words from later in the chapter.

[14 : 20] He knew what this chapter was about. He was humble and contrite in heart. He knew that the persecution he faced was not in a sense his fault, but was predicted by Isaiah.

And no wonder those who were stoning him were furious with him, because no doubt they also understood the reference. But Isaiah's concern in this chapter is not so much to deal with the issue of persecution, but rather to look beyond it.

What will happen for those who are humble and contrite in heart, beyond the opposition and persecution they face, and what will happen to their opponents also.

They will be put to shame, the end of verse 5 says. It is not the humble and contrite, the tremblers at the word, who will be shamed ultimately, but rather their faithless opponents.

Verse 6 then announces God's intervention into the situation, for that's what's needed, isn't it? In a world where the majority, it seems, are opposed to God's truth, and opposed to the humble and contrite, God will intervene to reverse the situation.

[15 : 41] And verse 6 is a dramatic announcement of God's final adjudication of the affairs. Literally it says, a voice, an uproar from the city, a voice from the temple, a voice of the Lord dealing retribution to his enemies.

Three times this herald, this trumpet sound of a voice, God's own voice, speaking indeed from the temple, and speaking words to his faithful ones, but also about the faithless ones.

He offers five images, five images of comfort for those who are humble and contrite of spirit, the tremblers of his word.

The first image of comfort is to do with birth. In the Bible there are lots of miraculous births. Isaac, for example, his parents were almost a hundred, and Sarah laughed when she was told that she'd be pregnant.

Isaac's birth is, in a sense, miraculous. Sarah was barren. Moses, though his actual birth is not so much miraculous, his preservation is, because he was born at the time when all Jewish babies were sentenced to death by Pharaoh.

[17 : 05] Ironically, laughingly, he was preserved by the very Pharaoh whose edict sentenced his death. And Samuel, his wife was barren.

his birth is also, in a sense, miraculous. But, of course, the climax of all of those is Jesus' birth, another miraculous, this time, virgin birth.

But in these words, from verse 7 onwards, we get another miraculous birth. This is also an unusual thing. Before she was in labour, she gave birth.

Before her pain came upon her, she delivered a son. What women here who've had children could testify to that experience? If only you could have birth without labour pains.

I met a lady the other day who's had 10 children. Seven and a half years of pregnancy. That is non-stop if you put it all end to end. Now, I don't know what it's like to give birth, but I've had kidney stones and they say that it's the same pain, almost.

[18 : 16] I don't think I'd like that for seven and a half years. Well, not that the labour's that long, but anyway. But who is this woman? I mean, who's heard of such a thing? Who's seen such a thing, verse 8 says?

Who is this woman who is giving birth here? What's going on? We're kept in suspense until the end of verse 8. We don't know who she is until we get to the end and then we realise that she is Zion, Jerusalem that is.

Yet as soon as Zion was in labour, she delivered her children. And this is God's work, as verse 9 makes clear. Now, what is this talking about?

What is this word of comfort to the humble and contrite in spirit? This is more than just re-inhabiting Jerusalem after the people have been expelled from it in exile and its temple destroyed.

This is not just about the people of God going back to the city and starting life all over again. Because the image of giving birth without labour pains is significant.

[19 : 25] Yes, it's very appealing. But to what does the absence of labour pains refer? Why do women giving birth have labour pains according to the Bible?

If you think carefully enough and look back in the Old Testament far enough, you find where the origin of labour pains comes. Genesis chapter 3.

Because of the sin of Adam and Eve, woman giving birth will suffer the pains of labour. So what's the significance here of birth without labour pains?

this is an end to sin and its curse. This is not just Jerusalem being repopulated and life starting over.

This is something radically new beginning. This is an end to the curse of sin in the world, an end to sinful people in the world. That's what Isaiah's extraordinary vision here is anticipating and it is God's doing, not ours.

[20 : 51] Perhaps the saddest pictures we see of Kosovo are the orphaned children, the ones without parental protection, the ones without parental provision, the ones who if they do grow up will know neither mother nor father, those we see who are malnourished and scared.

You cannot promise much comfort to a newborn baby in Kosovo today. The second feature of comfort here goes beyond the birth to the parental protection and provision.

that's what verse 11 begins to talk about. You see, it's the growing up, it's the protection and the provision that will come from a mother, that you may nurse and be satisfied from her consoling breast, that you may drink deeply with delight from her glorious bosom.

It almost sounds like a smutty TV comment that someone like Sid James in the carry-on film would say, look at her glorious bosom. It is a strange sort of expression.

It is saying that this mother figure, this Jerusalem figure, will have, in a sense, large enough breasts to provide all and abundantly for her children.

[22 : 26] They will not be without. They will be protected and provided for. people. It is a beautiful picture of God's gracious provision for this new people.

And the picture continues in the second half of verse 12 as well. You shall nurse and be carried on her arm and dandled on her knees. As a mother comforts her child, so I will comfort you.

You shall be comforted in Jerusalem. That's a very unusual verse. God is being likened to a mother. He's not called a mother, but here is one of just a few occasions in the Bible when God is clearly a mother figure.

We know him and call him our father, and rightly so, but that doesn't deprive him of mother-like qualities. This is a picture of intimacy with God, and it is a picture that applies to the humble and contrite in spirit, those who tremble at God's word.

And notice the importance of comfort in verse 13. Three times it occurs, and indeed the word for bosom back in verse 11 is also a related word. Comfort is a significant part of the book of Isaiah.

[23 : 51] Remember that hinge point, the bit made famous, if not by Isaiah, by Handel's Messiah. comfort, comfort my people. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem.

The second half of the book announces the comfort of God's salvation, and here at the end of the book we get a resume of that theme again.

Comfort, comfort, three times in this verse, comfort, God's people. And the basis of that comfort we've seen in recent weeks lies at the heart of this second part of the book, in the servant who dies to take away sin.

You see, the comfort God offers is real and lasting comfort indeed. The first feature of comfort in these words to the humble and contrite who are persecuted was the miraculous birth.

the second was the protection and provision by mother Jerusalem and God as well. The third feature, the thing that all Kosovars crave for above all, is peace.

[25 : 02] Verse 12 begins, literally it says, I will extend peace, shalom that is, to her like a river, and the wealth of the nations like an overflowing stream.

Peace is a big concept, it's not detente, it's not a military ceasefire, it is about positive relationships, it is about well-being, it involves prosperity and wealth and life.

And it's the third feature, reassuring those who are humble and contrite in spirit. No wonder, given all those three features so far, that joy is the fourth and dominant theme in this.

Verse 10, rejoice with Jerusalem, be glad for her, all you who love her, rejoice with her in joy, that's a very exuberant and intense joy.

In that little expression, all you who mourn over her now, the same sort of thing at the beginning of verse 14, you shall see and your heart shall rejoice, your bodies shall flourish like the grass.

[26 : 13] Mourning is gone, that is grief is gone. No more crying, no more pain, no more persecution. The old things have gone. God is making all things new here.

This new miraculous birth of a new people without sin. No wonder joy is so dominant through these verses. But notice again the intimacy.

The second middle bit of verse 14, it shall be known that the hand of the Lord is with his servants, the humble and contrite in spirit, the tremblers before his word.

The fifth feature is that God's people's enemies will face judgment. It's payback time.

And that's what the end of verse 14 and onwards says. God's indignation is against his enemies. For the Lord will come in fire and his chariots like the whirlwind to pay back his anger in fury and his rebuke in flames of fire.

[27 : 26] For by fire will the Lord execute judgment and by his sword on all flesh. And those slain by the Lord shall be many. no doubt you've seen pictures of bushfires in the bushfire season on TV news.

And we see the destruction that a bushfire wreaks and yet so often in the midst of all the blackened landscape, a building that survives or some other landscape feature that survives untouched.

The fire of God is similar. but not so random. The fire of judgment you see holds no fear for those who are humble and contrite in spirit, those who tremble before his word.

But for those who are not, for those who are proud and self-righteous, God's fire is an intolerable furnace from which there is no escape.

you see verse 17 describes those who will suffer God's judgment as those who sanctify and purify themselves. That is those who are self-righteous, literally.

[28 : 45] Those who seek to make themselves righteous by their religious practices. self-righteousness is the ticket to hell.

the ones who will stand in God's fire are those whom he makes righteous and Isaiah has already told us how that will be through the death of his servant in chapter 53.

True holiness, true righteousness is God's gift, not our achievement. Isaiah is a tale of two cities.

Begins in chapter one, all those months ago when we looked at it, with Jerusalem, rebellious Jerusalem, God's children disobeying him, full of apostate worship and corruption.

And it ends with a second city also Jerusalem but the new Jerusalem. People who've enjoyed a new birth, people whose worship now is not corrupt but true and acceptable.

[30 : 13] In chapter one it is the people of Judah by and large. But in the new Jerusalem it's not just those who are descended from Judah, it is people of every nation.

you see God goes on to say in verse 18 that he will gather people of all nations to this new Jerusalem for I know their works and their thoughts and I am coming to gather all nations and tongues and they shall come and shall see my glory.

and I will set a sign among them a sign that's not here described but clearly something that will be miraculous and from them I will send survivors that is it seems to be from those who survive God's judgment on his people Israel that is Jewish survivors faithful Jews I will send them to the nations and we get a list of strange names they seem to be the farthest flung places of the world in Isaiah's day north south east and west and including the coastlands that are far away beyond their maps even and their purpose is to go and gather the nations so the end of verse 19 is that they are to go to all these places far away that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory and they shall declare my glory among the nations and then they that is the nations shall bring all your kindred from all the nations as an offering to the Lord that is it is the gentile nations who when they come in in faith to the new

Jerusalem will bring with them in a sense as a bonus the kindred of the Jewish survivors other Jews who will return to the Lord with humble and contrite spirits and tremble before his word and they will come in along with all these gentiles acceptable to God and then extraordinarily still speaking of gentiles in verse 21 God will take some of them as priests and as Levites an astonishing comment not any Jew could be a Levite or a priest but now that privilege is being extended to gentiles as well this is full of irony this paragraph Israel was meant to be the source of world blessing by Israel's life the world the gentiles were meant to be attracted to God they were meant to be a priestly nation through whom the world would come to a relationship with God the sources of that go way back to

Genesis 12 and Exodus 19 but Israel has failed by and large in that task in Isaiah's day so God is saying here he will get his gentiles to do the job they will bring in the Jews rather than vice versa does all of that ring bells with you does it make you recognise when it happens when some faithful Jews were sent out to all the nations go they were told and make disciples and the gospel spread to people who were not racial Jews but through them even other Jews would come to faith in this God and repentance and the bit about the priests that's us because the writer to the letter of Hebrews makes it very clear that you and I have a privilege even greater than the priests of the Old

[34 : 29] Testament to go up to the throne of grace with confidence into the most holy place by means of the death of God's servant so you see God will be faithful he will keep his promises to Abraham he promised Abraham that Abraham's name would be great and that his descendants would be great and at the beginning of Isaiah it looked as though that promise could not be fulfilled because Abraham's descendants were so faithless but now we see that God is determined to keep his promise despite the faithlessness of his people so he says in verse 22 for as the new heavens and the new earth which I will make shall remain before me says the Lord so shall your descendants and your name remain the very things he promised to Abraham he will keep God's faithfulness you see is bigger than our sin and faithlessness he's not thwarted by our failure he will keep his promises to the very end

Isaiah envisions a day then when people of every nation will gather around the throne of God in acceptable worship when the barrier between Jew and Gentile is broken down when people alike have humble and contrite hearts so then will all flesh come to worship before me he says in verse 23 that's the goal that matters you see in Isaiah and in the Bible it's more important than Tony Lockett's goal this is the goal for eternity it is what God is on about from the beginning and is still on about today and will be on about till the day that Jesus returns it is the goal for which Adam and Eve were placed in the garden it is the goal for which God spoke suddenly out of the blue to a man called Abraham in Mesopotamia and said I'm going to promise you all these things go to this land you've never been to before and it is this goal that governs why God suddenly spoke to a man called

Moses out of a burning bush and told him to go to Pharaoh and it is for this goal that he spoke to a man called Isaiah in about 750 BC and gave him a vision of God's glory a vision so great that Isaiah fell prostrate before it as we saw in chapter 6 acknowledging his sin with a humble and contrite heart trembling before God's word and then was commissioned by God to convey that vision of God's glory to a stubborn and rebellious people and it is this goal for which God himself took human form and died as a servant on a cross so that all flesh may see the glory of the cross so that all flesh may see God's glory and fall down in worship before him in Jewish synagogues even today I gather they don't end Isaiah with the last verse they read the last verse and then repeat verse 23 they don't like to finish with a verse that's negative and they shall go out and look at the dead bodies of the people who've rebelled against me for their worm shall not die their fire shall not be quenched and they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh what a way to end a great book it almost spoils it doesn't it and if you walk outside the walls of

Jerusalem in Isaiah's day south to the valley of Hinnom you would see what this is talking about where the refuse of the city was dumped and would smolder away burning it's where the graves would be where the dead would be placed the new Jerusalem Isaiah envisions will be a little bit similar perhaps at least in this pictorial way because those who are within the city will be able to look out and see those who are not it is an awful picture it is worse than anything we will ever see from Kosovo their worm shall not die the worms that eat the corpses their fire shall not be quenched they shall be an abhorrence to all flesh Isaiah is saying here don't take your salvation lightly you cannot sin with impunity ponder from what a terrible fate you have been rescued by God's grace the righteous will be victorious in the end the humble and contrite in spirit those who tremble at God's word will stand at the end but they'll stand because it is God who makes them righteous what else can we do in response to this word in response to this picture of

God's glory but fall down and worship this God woe is me a man of unclean lips Isaiah said in his vision our response ought to be little less than that to be called in God's way with eyes all the i i i the the the