

Gathering the Outcasts

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[0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 11th of April 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.

His sermon is entitled Gathering the Outcasts and is from Isaiah chapter 56 verses 1 to 8.

The question is, should Shane Warne have been dropped before the fourth test, for the third test or the second test or not even have gone to the West Indies?

Now in case you're wondering what on earth I'm talking about, it's cricket. It's a game of heaven. So if you don't know anything about cricket, now's a good time to learn. But it's an important question. And if you read the sports pages of the age, as I always do, or any other paper for that matter, or listen to talkback radio, that was the question that was floating around in March.

Should Shane Warne be dropped? Ought he to have gone to the West Indies in the first place? Now of course that's in one sense cricket and maybe in the end, in eternal scale of things, perhaps even trivial.

[1 : 1 6] But the question of who's in and who's out is one that faces us all the time. Should Shane Warne have been in or should he have been out?

It's an issue in cricket. It's an issue in football. All those people who race out and read Friday's Age, the thing that you read is who's in and who's out of your team. But of course it's also an issue in things like churches.

Who's in and who's out? You see there are some churches who let anybody and everybody in. The list that follows is not putting them into one box, but to give you some ideas, there are some churches that will let in black people, people of different socio-economic class, people who are handicapped, there are churches who welcome in adulterers or pedophiles or even perhaps heretics.

And after all those churches say, well God invites everyone. He extends open welcoming arms to anyone and everyone. We saw that last week in Isaiah chapter 55.

Come, come you who are thirsty, come and drink, come, come. There's no restriction place there. Anybody and everybody is invited in under God's invitation in the preceding chapter.

[2 : 3 9] But there are others who perhaps are less inclusive, less welcoming, who prefer some people to stay outside the walls of a church or God's people.

They're those that set up particular standards or criteria which need to be met in order to welcome somebody in. Sometimes, of course, it's unsaid. It's not as though it's official church policy.

You're allowed in so long as you've got enough wealth. You're articulate enough. You don't smell. You live in the local area. You've got the right sort of job or haircut or even hair colour for that matter.

You're allowed in. You're allowed in. You're allowed in. You're allowed in. You're allowed in. You're allowed in. And others are excluded.

It's a difficult issue, isn't it? It's not quite black and white. How inclusive ought we to be? How exclusive ought we to be as a church, as Christians, dealing with other individuals?

[3 : 45] And one reason why I think churches have found this issue so confusing and often to their detriment is because the inclusiveness of welcome is often carried over into a tolerance of any behaviour or attitude.

For many people, coming to God or coming to church just as I am, to quote the first line of a well-known hymn, just as I am becomes so shall I stay.

But that's never Jesus' logical conclusion. The invitation is to come just as I am. But the coming to God and to Jesus demands moral change.

He said to the woman who'd committed adultery in John chapter 8, Nor do I condemn you, but go and sin no more. There was an invitation, a welcome, but also the demand of moral change.

And Jesus held the two in a fine and appropriate balance. That issue of inclusive-exclusive lies at the heart of this chapter, Isaiah 56. And you may like to have it open to follow through these eight verses, page 599.

[5 : 02] Last week's passage began with an all-inclusive invitation to come and drink, without cost. You see, there was no socio-economic criteria there.

Didn't need any money to get in there and buy from God. But now in this chapter, chapter 56, we find some of the demands that are expected for those who come.

Thus says the Lord, maintain justice and do what is right. That's the demand being placed on anyone who comes and responds to the all-inclusive invitation.

It's just like Jesus saying to that woman who'd committed adultery, You're welcome, I don't condemn you, but go and sin no more. For that's what saying maintain justice and do what is right is saying, sin no more, in effect.

Justice and righteousness are actually the two words there. Maintain justice and literally do righteousness. And the word pair of justice and righteousness, they overlap in meaning.

[6 : 10] And they go together time and time again in not only Isaiah, but elsewhere in the Bible as well. It's part of the character of God, Isaiah tells us in various places.

The God who exercises both justice and righteousness. Moreover, it's something that involves practice as well as principle.

Justice and righteousness together involve the actual doing of what is right, and often for the benefit and sake of other people, as well as maintaining the principles of what is right according to God's standards.

And the motivation for maintaining justice and doing righteousness is because God's salvation and deliverance is imminent. It's coming soon, the end of verse 1 tells us.

That is, we are to maintain justice and do righteousness in anticipation of the coming salvation. Not in order to earn it, because that salvation we saw was freely given last week.

[7 : 15] But in response to a sure anticipation of God's coming salvation, we respond to that grace by maintaining justice and doing righteousness.

We exercise right behaviour now for the sake of the salvation which is coming on the final day. Now, I've begun to say we in this.

Initially, this was addressed to ancient Israel. But these principles of maintaining justice and doing righteousness carry on, virtually without qualification, right through the New Testament as well.

And so we ought to see ourselves as being addressed by these words, and not just as though they were addressed to the Israelites of 700 BC. The other thing about justice and righteousness in the book of Isaiah is that they are absent in the people of God.

The very first chapter tells us that. Isaiah chapter 1, and if you've got very good memories, I preached on this at the end of September last year, but I don't expect you to remember that far back.

[8 : 25] But justice and righteousness are absent in the people. And in fact, in those first chapters, there is quite a scathing condemnation of their lack of justice and their lack of righteousness.

So much so that they're pictured, the Israelites are pictured as a vineyard in chapter 5 that is virtually dead because of the absence of these two features, justice and righteousness.

But God has promised in the early chapters of Isaiah that his Messiah would come and bring justice and righteousness. to bring to the people what is absent in their own behaviour and attitudes.

Chapter 9 told us that. But then more recently, in chapter 53, the great passage about the servant who gives up his life for the sake of the people, we see that one of the reasons for that giving up of his life is to make many righteous.

In chapter 53, verse 11. You see, what's going on there with regard to the servant's death is this. If you make that servant's death your sin offering, that is, if you allow that servant's death to carry your own sins and iniquities, then not only do you find that you are forgiven for your sins and iniquities, but that death has power to make you righteous as well.

[9 : 57] We saw hints of that on Good Friday morning and you're welcome to get a tape if you want to follow that through in more detail. But what it's saying is this, that God's grace, which is extended to welcome anyone in and give them free salvation, also has about it the power to transform the recipients of that salvation.

It's not just that God's grace extends so that we can come just as I am, but the same grace has power to change so that we become who we're meant to be and not stay just as I am.

The New Testament has exactly the same theology as these two chapters put together in Isaiah. You can see it in Romans, you see it in Titus, and elsewhere in the New Testament, that God's grace is freely given to anyone and everyone to come to him for free salvation, paid for by the death of his servant.

But the same grace that establishes us as forgiven people, the New Testament word is justification, we are justified, is the same grace that has the power to sanctify us, to transform us into being the people God wants us to be.

And that's what's going on here, because this chapter is building on the death of that servant who died to make many righteous. You see, the writer Isaiah is not just saying now, come on, it's about time you practice justice and righteousness, there's a sense of that rebuke here.

[11 : 38] But building on the death of the servant three chapters ago, there is also an acknowledgement that the servant's death's power will actually fulfil the demand for justice and righteousness.

Isaiah goes on to give some sort of qualification or explanation, really, about what this means. Happy is the mortal who does this.

the one who holds it fast, who keeps the Sabbath, not profaning it, and refrains from doing any evil.

Do you see what justice and righteousness means, what it involves? It doesn't just mean sort of legal advocacy for the poor and needy as sometimes interpreted.

Justice and righteousness is in the end a summary term for obeying God's law, for obeying God's will. One example specifically is given in verse 2, keeping the Sabbath, and that seems to be a very important theme for the people who later, after Isaiah's day, were in exile as a mark of their distinctiveness and a mark of their ongoing trust and faith in God in a pagan world.

- [12 : 56] But really, what justice and righteousness is about is being like God, the righteous one, imitating his character, obeying his law.

But it's not slavish legalism or reluctant duty that is being commanded here. Happy is the one who does this. There is a sense of internal delight about being a person who practices justice and does righteousness.

It is not an unwillingness as though God's law is sort of stifling our enjoyment of life, as though Christian law is somehow being a sort of unpleasant, puritanical wowserism that we're not meant to enjoy anything.

Happy is the one who does this. There's delight. There's enjoyment of blessing. There's great joy here at the person who maintains justice and does what is righteous.

But the joy also has another dimension. The salvation we're told in verse 1 is soon to come. The joy, the happiness that is expressed in verse 2 is tied to that salvation.

- [14 : 12] You know, so much of our happiness is actually anticipation of something. On Friday, I took my godson and his brother to play mini-golf with their parents.

and it was, I thought, to have been a surprise for them. And I wasn't saying anything about where we're going and then my godson mentioned that we're going to play mini-golf.

And I said to his parents, I thought this was a surprise and they said, well, we thought it would be, but then we realised how much enjoyment they had from anticipating today.

And it's true for us, isn't it? our enjoyment of things is very often tied with the anticipation of it. I'm already beginning to enjoy my holidays, even though they're 14 weeks and one day and a few hours away.

The joy of anticipation is a significant Christian joy and all of us ought to exercise that. Happy is the mortal who practises righteousness and maintains justice.

- [15 : 25] Is that your joy? Is that a description of you? Or what does all this mean for the issues of inclusiveness and exclusiveness?

Who's in and who's out? The inclusiveness of welcome as we saw last week, but now we see that there's not an unconditional inclusivism. Because the demand is placed on those who come in to maintain justice and do righteousness.

You see, the marks of the true recipients of God's grace are justice and righteousness, or to put it in other terminology, faith and obedience. We could describe it in various ways, in summary terms like that.

You see, the issue is character, not colour. It's righteousness and not race. righteousness. They're the marks of who's in and who's out, maintaining justice and doing righteousness.

All are welcome in, but those who truly respond to that invitation are those who bear these marks of justice and righteousness.

- [16 : 36] Too many Christians and too many Christian churches, I think, are imbalanced on this issue of inclusive exclusivism. There are some who are too exclusive, who in their body language, if anything, exclude those who are not well educated, who have the wrong colour, not enough wealth, are not articulate enough, don't have the right status, those who they welcome by their body language, those who don't smoke but exclude those who do, or something like that.

But on the other hand, at the other extreme, there are churches that also get confused about being too inclusive, that anything goes, and it's often under the guise of God's love. We should welcome anyone in, ask no questions, just as I am, so shall they always be.

But you see, real love demands what is best, and what is best is that someone maintains justice and does what is righteous.

For Israel, ancient Israel, this was a significant issue. history, they had a history of racial arrogance, indeed beyond the day of Isaiah as well.

They excluded people of other races for the sake of some sort of ethnic purity, I suppose a primitive form of ethnic cleansing to an extent.

[18 : 02] And they found some justification for that in the early parts of the Old Testament. For example, in Deuteronomy 23, no Moabite or Ammonite was allowed to be part of God's assembly.

They were to be excluded to the tenth generation. But they made the mistake, it seems, of thinking that the race was the mark of being in or out.

Be an Israelite, you're in. Be a non-Israelite, you're out. But the issue in the Old Testament correctly understood is that it's not an issue of race, but an issue of righteousness.

And so we find ironically, from time to time, Israelites in the end being out. Not because of a racial problem, but because of a lack of righteousness.

Indeed, Israel's history is so distorted because of their misunderstanding of this issue, that they failed to understand their whole purpose in being was to be the agent of blessing to the rest of the world.

[19 : 04] To bring the whole world in to worship God. But the other issue that seems to be of appropriate time of Isaiah and the period of the exile is the issue of eunuchs.

In ancient Babylon, which is where Israel was exiled in the 6th century BC, those who served in the court were eunuchs, emasculated men.

And often it seemed probably forcibly made so by the Babylonians in order for them to qualify to work in the court. And again, like the foreigners, traditionally these people were despised by Israelites.

And again, Deuteronomy 23 provides some justification for it when it forbids any eunuch to be involved in temple worship. But now in this chapter, God is setting both those things into its right context.

the issue of foreigners and the issue of eunuchs. But he does it for pastoral reasons here. It's actually not so much instructing the people about who to let in, but it's actually pastorally encouraging the eunuchs and the foreigners to come in.

[20 : 21] It seems that the issue here is that some foreigners may well have been dissuaded to follow God because of God's people. their fear of exclusion.

It seems that in the exile and the end of the exile, probably foreigners would have marveled at the God who's done all this, but then been afraid of joining them because they know that they will be excluded by God's people, the Israelites.

And the same for eunuchs. They may have been disinclined to return back to the promised land because they feared being excluded by God's people. Their life was probably better off for them in Babylon.

Babylon. That ought not be the case and that's what verse 3 is saying. Do not let the foreigner joined to the Lord say, the Lord will surely separate me from his people.

And the same for the eunuch. Don't let the eunuch say, I'm just a dry tree. That is, I've got no offspring. You see, it's encouraging the eunuch and the foreigner to come in and it's exhorting the people to let them in.

[21 : 25] And it gives reasons for that in the verses that follow. And it deals with eunuchs first and then foreigners. Two verses for each. It describes them in the first verse, verses 4 and 6. And then it promises them various things in verses 5 and 7.

So firstly, the eunuchs and three criteria are given for them in verse 4 that are important if they're to be included in God's people. Thus says the Lord, to the eunuchs and then firstly, who keep my Sabbaths.

We might think that's a fairly trivial law to have first on the list, but as I've said in the time of the exile it seems this was a very significant issue of demonstrating your faith in God in a pagan world.

But more than that, keeping the Sabbath was also a mark of confidence in God's eternal rest. It was an act of trust that one day God would bring about his perfect rest and his people would enjoy that with him forever.

So to keep the Sabbath was a mark of great faith in a pagan world. Secondly, they were to choose the things that please God. The middle of verse 4.

[22 : 36] That is, they're people who aren't coming after God for what they can get out of God. They're coming after God for godly reasons. And they're choosing the things. There's a mark of personal decision here that please God.

Not please themselves or even others, but the things that please God himself. And thirdly, and perhaps the summary of all of that, people who hold fast my covenant.

The covenant is the relationship between God and his people. Like a marriage relationship really. A firm and sworn commitment between God and his people.

To hold fast God's covenant probably means two things. It means to take God's promises seriously. And it means to take his law seriously as well.

For they lie at the heart of the covenant between God and people. Notice a couple of things too about those descriptions in verse 4. One is that the verbs that are used denote a habitual behaviour.

[23 : 43] It's not just somebody who might occasionally keep the Sabbath or occasionally hold fast to the covenant. It's somebody who makes that their ongoing practice and habit. But also notice the relationship there.

To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose the things that please me and hold fast my covenant. These are eunuchs who are in a relationship with God.

They're not remote. They know him. And they're holding fast to his things. If we were to summarise that, we're saying that the criteria for inclusiveness here is faithful obedience, trusting God and obeying his laws.

To them, God promises various things in verse 5. I will give, he says, in my house and within my walls, as is within the temple sanctuary itself, the very place that eunuchs were forbidden to go.

They will be promised something. And he will give them there a monument and a name better than sons and daughters. Now in the ancient world, it was your children that carried on your family name.

[24 : 57] To die childless was a bit of a shameful thing to do. Less, more so than in our own day and age, I guess. But God is promising them there something better than sons and daughters.

A monument to them in the temple itself, in God's very presence itself. When Absalom, the son of King David, died childless, before he died, he built a monument to himself.

Even today in Jerusalem, there's Absalom's monument, although it's not the original one in the valley around Jerusalem. God here is promising an everlasting monument, something to commemorate and remember their name forever.

And he stresses that at the end of verse 5 by saying, I will give them an everlasting name that shall not be cut off. I think the hint of what's being said there is this.

At the end of last week's chapter, verse 13, there would be an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off regarding God. Now for a eunuch who's joined to God, the same sort of thing is promised.

[26 : 11] I think the implication of what's promised here is this. That the eunuchs who are joined to God, who hold on to his covenant promises, they will share God's everlasting eternity with him, within his temple walls, in the place of his very presence.

You cannot get a better promise than that. And it's promised to people who traditionally were excluded from going anywhere near the temple of God.

Jesus spoke of various types of eunuchs. People who were born as eunuchs, people who were forced to become them, people who on their own volition became in a sense voluntary eunuchs.

I guess people who were single, people who are childless. And I guess for those of us who are single or childless or both, there is a great promise here.

I know that John Calvin, the reformer of the 16th century, took great encouragement from this promise, for he was childless and he knew that this promise applied to him as well.

[27 : 23] Well, the same pattern applies to the foreigners in verses 6 and 7. They're described in the first verse and then the promises to them come in the verse that follows. And again for the foreigners, a few three things, but the first one's the important one.

The second two are just repeats of what was said about the eunuchs. So the end of verse 6, those who keep the Sabbath and do not profane it and hold fast my covenant are the same as what we've already seen for the eunuchs.

But now the different ones, the first one, and the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord. The idea is almost of marriage, of cleaving to God, of joining in a solemn and committed way.

It's not just somebody who these days joins an AFL team and then the next AFL draft comes along and they end up joining another team. This is a long-term committed cleaving or joining, a commitment between this person and God.

It's a personal decision and it's a serious commitment that's being made here. So it's got a sense of marriage about it, if you like. And the purpose of them joining are remarkable.

[28 : 33] Three things. To minister to him. To minister to God. As if anybody could minister to God who has everything. The idea of ministry though, here, the word is about being like a temple priest.

It's the word that's used of the Levitical priests. This is an extraordinary thing to say about a foreigner. Because not any ordinary Israelite could minister to God.

Only the Levite tribe could. One in twelve tribes. But this is saying that the foreigners who join themselves to the Lord can minister to him. This is a shocking thing to say, in effect, to an Israelite.

That a foreigner would be welcome in to minister to God. Cultic service, in a sense. No wonder the Dead Sea Scrolls version of Isaiah omits that part of the verse.

Probably they were too scandalised by it. The second thing is to love his name. Again, it's God-centred. Not for one's own benefit do you join yourself to God, but for God's glory.

[29 : 44] And the third thing is to be his servants. Now there, I think, is something quite ironical. Because throughout this book of Isaiah, it's clear that Israel ought to have been God's servants and failed.

So God had to send a special servant. The one who died for the would-be servants. And now we find foreigners who are servants of the Lord.

That's a bit of a slap in the face for the Israelites who heard these words. That a foreigner could be God's servant. Well, to these foreigners, God promises three things.

And each of these three promises builds in intensity, it seems to me. Firstly, in verse 7, I will bring them. Notice that it's God's action.

Not just that they come, but God will bring them. He's the carrying God, as we've seen in recent weeks. I will bring them to my holy mountain. The holy mountain is another name for Mount Zion.

[30 : 48] It's the place where the temple was, but it's the surrounds of that temple as well. It's Jerusalem, in effect, that God will bring these people. That's the vision of God way back in Isaiah chapter 2.

That in his transformed world, Mount Zion will be at its center. And now we get another hint of that. But take a step closer as well, because that's the next phrase.

It's not just saying the same thing. Not only will he bring them to my holy mountain, but he'll make them joyful in my house of prayer. Now the house of prayer in the temple was not the very heart of the temple, but part of the temple courts.

So not only have they come to the Mount Zion, they've now come within the temple gates and walls as well, into its courts. So you see that the step is a step closer in the second phrase.

And God is bringing them joy in the house of prayer. The implication is that their prayers will be answered. So here are foreigners able to pray to God and their prayers are answered. But also the sense of joy that we've seen time and again in recent chapters applies to those who God restores to himself.

[31 : 59] But then it culminates at the end of verse 7. Not only do they come to the mountain, not only into the temple courts where the house of prayer was, but their burnt offerings and their sacrifices will be accepted on my altar.

That's the very heart of the temple. The Holy of Holies is God's altar. And it was there that the high priest would take the sacrifice of atonement once a year, etc.

These are outstanding promises for foreigners. Because in the Old Testament no foreigners were allowed in. And in Jesus' day the same thing applied. And there was a sign on the outer wall of the temple beyond which only Jews could go.

And the sign said any Gentile, that is a non-Jew, crosses beyond this point at promise of his death. It was that issue that landed Paul in jail, if you remember, towards the end of the Acts of the Apostles.

But here is God promising a foreigner, not only that they can get past that sign, that they can get into the inner courts, but their sacrifices on the very central altar will be acceptable to God.

[33 : 22] This is very, very different from Israel. And that's more of the irony. Because Isaiah chapter 1 tells us that the sacrifices of the Israelites weren't acceptable.

Their lack of justice and righteousness meant that all the sacrifices in the world would not make God accept them. He hated their sacrifices. They were an abomination to him in chapter 1.

But now we get a sense of real worship, acceptable worship, but ironically by foreigners. Not by Israelites. Now we should not see that this chapter, or this section of this chapter, is a concession to foreigners.

As though God has had several petitions from Gentiles saying it's about time you let us in. Alright, well I'll let you in now. This rather is not a concession, it is the fulfilment of God's whole purpose.

When the temple was built and Solomon prayed at its dedication in 1 Kings 8, he acknowledged the fact that there would be foreigners who would come and worship God and be found acceptable by God in the temple.

[34 : 25] This is the fulfilment of what God's been on about. That the world would be drawn to worship him through his own people, the Israelites. They failed. But through the death of the servant, fulfilment, that fulfilment will come.

And the world will come and worship God. And that's what's said in verse 8. Thus says the Lord God, who gathers the outcasts of Israel, but even more than that, I will gather others to them, the Gentiles, the people of the nations who aren't Israelites or Jews, besides those already gathered.

There was a man who fitted both of these excluded categories. He was a foreigner. He was also a eunuch. For the Jews of his day, he was persona non grata.

He happened to be the treasurer of Ethiopia. And he travelled to Jerusalem on business. And on his way back was reading this book, Isaiah.

He didn't understand it, it seems. And it happened that somebody was passing by and he asked him, what is all this about? And the person told him where it was fulfilled.

[35 : 57] It wasn't fulfilled in 538 BC when the Jews were allowed to go back to the land. It wasn't fulfilled in 520 BC when the Jews started to rebuild the temple. It wasn't fulfilled in 515 BC when the temple was completed and sacrifices were once again offered in that temple.

But rather that man told that Ethiopian eunuch, Jesus Christ is what this is pointing towards. For Jesus Christ is the good shepherd whose flock is not just Jews, but there are other sheep of other flocks who know my voice.

Jesus Christ is the one who brings people to the real mountain of God. Not the physical Jerusalem that lies in the northern hemisphere today, but to the new heavenly Jerusalem. The one day is coming down out of heaven prepared for us.

It is Jesus Christ who brings people to that heavenly Jerusalem. And Christian people are there already, the writer to the Hebrews tells us.

Jesus Christ who tells us what the real temple is as well. Not a building built with bricks and mortar, but himself, his body, risen from the dead after three days in the grave.

[37 : 13] And it is Jesus Christ whose sacrifice for sin is acceptable to God on God's altar, bringing us into a relationship with God.

And it is the name of Jesus Christ that is given to his people, Jew or Gentile. A name that is above every name.

An everlasting name. An everlasting monument, if you like. That Ethiopian eunuch found fulfillment of this promise.

God promised him that he wasn't just a dry tree, that he'd be unremembered because he was childless. For that Ethiopian eunuch is still remembered.

In Jerusalem, on top of the very church that commemorates the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, is a little chapel. It is poor because Ethiopian people are very poor.

[38 : 16] And inside that chapel are some gracious Ethiopian priests and monks. And when I've been in there, they've willingly picked up their cross-shaped Bible and opened it to Acts chapter 8 and read for me and the groups that I've been with from that chapter.

I know no words of Ethiopic. The only word in the whole passage that I recognized was Gaza. Because that's where the Ethiopian eunuch was traveling.

But there at the very place of the death and resurrection of Jesus Christ, that Ethiopian eunuch is commemorated and remembered still today.

He's in. His race didn't exclude him. His imperfect body didn't exclude him. But as one who found faith and obedience in Jesus Christ, he's in.

This chapter begs two questions of us then. About our attitudes to being exclusive or inclusive.

[39 : 37] What criteria do we use subtly, subconsciously as well as explicitly? But more personally as well. Are we in?

Do we meet the criteria of this chapter? We may have willingly come as thirsty people responding to the invitation of chapter 55.

Just as I am, but have we just stayed as we were? Or is verse two a description of us? Happy is the one who does this.

The one who holds it fast. Who keeps the Sabbath not profaning it. And refrains from doing any evil.