

## **Sunday 15<sup>th</sup> March – Bible Course 6: 'Jesus' (Isaiah 9, Matthew 4:12-25)**

Our first reading today is often associated with Advent and Christmas – but is a wonderful one to help us understand different aspects of our Gospel reading from Matthew.

The people walking in darkness – what was this darkness the people were walking in? We have two sets of people to think about today – the people to whom Isaiah was preaching – and the people of first century Palestine.

The first set, are a people frightened and worried by the forces of other nations – and led by a King who was neither morally nor militarily particularly trustworthy. Aram and the northern Kingdom had tried to invade Jerusalem and this pressure King Ahaz to join them in a military alliance against Assyria – hadn't managed it, but still, Judah was insecure. A neighbouring kingdom – and a kingdom which had once been their brothers in Israel and were now acting against them. And then the looming shadow of Assyria – who King Ahaz made deals with to try and ensure the security of Israel – but in his desire to court the Assyrians he took on their worship practices and built their altars.

Judah was isolated and afraid, and encouraged to worship other gods than Yahweh – to accept worship practices which brought no blessing from God, but instead brought His anger and judgement.

And centuries later the people in darkness are overrun by a foreign nation – invaded and ruled by the Romans – but to be honest they were just the latest in a line of foreign powers who neither understand the Jewish ways or followed the Jewish religion. And ruled by a puppet king – Herod Antipas who had charge of Galilee for the Romans - who was supposed to be their protector and their leader, but was corrupt and cruel. Who rather than listening to God's prophet, acknowledged even by Jewish authorities as a man with a special message – a message worth responding to, of repentance and turning back to God – rather than listening to him – he had imprisoned him.

What darkness – centuries apart – but the same story in many ways. Desperate people – who are led by unworthy men. Insecure, frightened, sick and suffering – and unable to really put their faith in the leaders they have. People who have no shalom – no peace.

Darkness isolates. It seems to magnify our worries and fears – and we cannot see whether there are people around us or not. 'I was totally in the dark about this' – I had no clue, no idea what was going on.

It can paralyse us and make it very hard to take action.

Currently we are going through a time of insecurity aren't we as a nation – indeed as a world. We are doing our best as a nation to deal with and delay the spread of a virus – and the best advice currently involves good hygiene – excellent – and also isolation.

I have no issue with medical advice – that's not what today is about – but it has been interesting to reflect on some of the conversations that have been going on about loneliness and how many people are already isolated – either because of medical issues, or because of other reasons. Our PM urged us all to look after our neighbours and do what we can – even in the midst of panic buying and fear among many.

When it's truly dark out – the stars shine incredibly brightly don't they? I will never forget travelling back from New York overnight – it had been a horrible flight and there was a bit of me convinced I was going to plunge to my doom over the Atlantic in the darkness! I was LONGING to see the sun rise – and when I did things instantly felt better.

Well light had dawned – God was about to do something brilliant and wonderful – and it was so certain Isaiah spoke about it as if it had already occurred.

The people walking in the darkness of fear and insecurity and with a morally dubious King were about to rejoice over a child whose names would tell them something about the amazing God who would never forget them. Isaiah was probably talking about the birth of Hezekiah – Ahaz's son – and unlike his father he turned out to be an absolute light for Israel – 1 Kings 18 says 'Hezekiah trusted in the Lord, the God of Israel. There was no one like him among all the kings of Judah, either before him or after him.'

In the middle of all the fear about Assyria, the aggression from neighbours and those with whom relations had completely broken down – in the middle of the isolation, God's people are reminded that God, in contrast to their current king, is a wonderful counsellor – an absolutely brilliant ruler, who is Mighty – more than able to deal with the Arams and northern kingdoms and superpowers of the time. And, incidentally, mighty God – who is the true God and will stand no worship of imposters – that God will always care for Israel – as an everlasting Father – a relationship of love and care and discipline which will not end, no matter what Israel do – and who is perfectly able to administer peace – wholeness, well-being, security – Shalom. Don't forget this – O Judah – and this child is going to bear names that remind you of this – a sign of your on-going relationship with the creator God who chose you and has made a covenant with you

Now if Isaiah could get so excited about this particular child – no wonder the early church came to understand this prophecy in a rich and new way – and came to see these words of Isaiah in a much wider vision.

When centuries after Isaiah spoke them – a new, and bright light dawned in the darkness of Roman oppression and a humiliated and humbled Israel – and this child – well this Son was not only a sign of these things about God – He embodied these Godly qualities – and look – says Matthew – there he is – doing it! See what these attributes of God actually look like in the flesh! Preaching to the hearts of the people about the kingdom – teaching and explaining to call their minds and bringing wellness and wholeness in mighty acts of healing – administering peace to the increasing crowds of people who had been excluded from it. Being the leader, administrator and mighty protector that Herod the Tetrarch could have been and should have been – but like so many before him, hadn't been.

This is the light of the world

The light of shalom – wellbeing and wholeness

The light that takes away both the fear and the inevitability of walking, living in the darkness of a life separated from God

This light is Jesus Christ

And the crowds gather because they need the light of God – the wholeness and shalom of God.

We have heard such a lot of bad news, haven't we recently – and some people love a bit of bad news don't they – love to share and chew over all the difficulties and bad news.

But I wonder what you are like when you have good news to share? I think generally we like to tell the people we care about, or who it would benefit.

For example – if you manage to find a shop that currently has some toilet roll or some flour you let people know who might need it, don't you? I hope so! Or if you happen to be in Boots when the hand sanitiser delivery is in – you might ring someone and tell them – or buy them a bottle. We know who really needs to hear it – who might benefit – and sometimes we don't know but a stray remark makes a huge difference to someone.

I wonder if you have a good news story to tell – of your encounter with the light of the world, Jesus Christ. Who embodied on earth and continues through His Spirit on Earth to be a counsellor and king, a mighty worker of powerful acts, to be utterly trustworthy and maintain a relationship of care and love with his people and who administers and longs to administer shalom – peace, wholeness and wellness and rest and security.

I hope so – because your story testifies to him – his presence, and brings him glory.

Just as Simon Peter and Andrew, and James and John were called by Jesus – Jesus still calls people today. People like you and me. And he calls us to be part of his family – part of this kingdom of light and shalom and understanding. Calls us to enjoy this privilege and then to tell and testify to it – and share our experiences of Christ's shalom with others. How we live our lives matters to God, indeed who we are matters to God.

If you don't yet have a story to tell, if you haven't yet experienced the shalom of Jesus Christ – it's never too late – maybe today is the day.

Finally – I think many of could do with good news couldn't we – it can feel a bit like we are walking through darkness at the moment – and many of us know what it is to follow Christ in difficulty. Never mind telling good news – we need to hear it again.

Jesus promised that we would find rest for our souls in him – his burden is easy, his yoke is light and he is gentle and humble in heart. If you are feeling troubled – tell him. Scared about the corona virus or unsure of what you should do – tell him. He encouraged his disciples as he encourages us today – that the Holy Spirit, sent by the Father in Jesus' name would come to remind us of Jesus' words and teach us – and he leaves us His peace.

Jesus does not self-isolate from us – He is here by His Spirit and he remains with those who will take up his yoke and follow him. This Wonderful Counsellor, this Mighty God, this Everlasting Father, this Prince of Peace – who calls us His friends and brings light to our world.

Amen