

CV service 2, March 29 2020 – Isaiah 29.

Had we been meeting this week, the service would have taken the form of songs of praise, with some reflections on themes from Isaiah 29. It's another chapter mixing woe and destruction with hope for the future. We could have explored the theme of the Potter and the clay, or we might have focussed on the very last verse "Foolish people will learn to understand, and those who are always grumbling will be glad to be taught." However, in the light of our current lock down and the insecurity of this Covid 19 situation, we will be looking at the first section of chapter 29, which talks very specifically about the fact that it is God who will bring disaster on Jerusalem, God who will attack the city.

On social media I have heard people ask the question, 'Is this virus God punishing us for our wickedness?' If we only had the Old Testament scriptures, we might very well believe this was the case. Isaiah and the other prophets constantly warned God's people to turn back to God before judgement came upon them because of their breaking of the Covenant. They broke the Covenant, despite knowing full well the curses that would be unleashed by doing so, despite knowing judgement would be the outcome. However, if we read carefully, we see that judgement and punishment were forms of discipline designed to draw people to God – both those of His chosen nation and those from other nations. This is what the warning is about in chapter 29 and the reason for hope given in chapter 29. Isaiah foresees the day when God's people will follow because they understand God's word and His desire for them to be His people – show light to the rest of the nations.

Why do I think Covid 19 (or a plague of locusts or a devastating earthquake) is not the same kind of action of judgement from God? The chief reason is because of a beautiful prophecy Isaiah gave that was fulfilled by Jesus. We are jumping the gun a bit by looking at Isaiah 53, but it's a very fitting text in the approach to Easter. Isaiah says that God will lay the sin of every person onto one person – His servant. He further says that it is that one servant who will deal with sin by taking the punishment we all deserve for sin onto himself. This idea of Jesus as a substitute for us as he was crucified helps us understand the Cross, as does the idea that Jesus gave himself as a willing perfect sacrifice to bring about the end of the Temple sacrificial system, the idea of Jesus giving himself as a ransom for many and the idea of Jesus experiencing death in order to defeat it. Returning to the idea of wickedness being punished, this was done once, for all, by Jesus on the cross. God therefore no longer uses punishment to discipline nations or individuals in order to draw them close to Himself. We can draw near with confidence, as it says in Hebrews, because Jesus has blazed the trail for us to the very throne room of God. We just have to follow him there.

Isaiah did not see the whole revelation of how God would deal with wickedness; he did not foresee that God would send His son to be the servant; he did not know how the requirements of the Law would be fulfilled. Thank God, indeed, that we have the New Covenant and can see God's big plan from beginning almost to the end. It is only natural for us to feel confused, anxious, upset and angry in this time when everything is constantly changing around us and when our lives are threatened by an invisible enemy. We are experiencing grief – grief for the loss of old, familiar ways, grief for the uncertainty of what tomorrow might bring, grief for friends, family or neighbours who are sick and may die because of this virus. Like Isaiah, we can offer all of that grief, pain and confusion to God, as

well as our praise. This is a time for lament, even as we still have hope and faith and can praise God.

Reflect on the mixture of emotions you have felt this week. Have you been honest with yourself, with family or friends and with God? Accept the darker emotions, but let the light of God shine on them too. Ecclesiastes reminds us that there is a season for everything and this is not a season of unalloyed joy and sunshine.

Remember there is a church What'sApp group to discuss issues raised by this week's passage or other things happening because of Covid 19. If you haven't joined yet but would like to, please let Debbie Hardiman have your mobile number (it needs to be a smart phone)

Suggestions for music this week:

The Psalmist knew deep joy and deep sorrow, but also the faithfulness of God through every circumstance. Singing or listening to one of the versions of Psalm 24 reminds us of this. You might choose, 'The Lord's My Shepherd' or 'The King of Love my Shepherd is'.

It isn't always easy to praise God when things seem bleak. It may be a real sacrifice of praise. Matt Redman's song 'Blessed Be Your Name' or 'We have sung our songs of victory' by Stuart Townend might help express that.

Yet we know God is faithful, so it would perhaps lift your spirit to sing or listen to 'It is well with my soul' and give you reassurance that though you are small, God is big, to join in with 'my hope is built on nothing less'.

Ideas for prayer:

If you are online, I would encourage you to keep watching out for prayer activities to join in with, like the BU live streams at 7pm on Sundays and Wednesdays, or from other denominations too. It is very encouraging to pray at the same time as others.

I am going to suggest that we also pray for each other during the time we can't meet with each other. Most people are in a pastoral group headed up by one of the deacons, so week by week, I'll give you the names of brothers and sisters to pray for from one of those groups or those not in a group.

This week, let's pray for those in Debbie Hardiman's group: Kim B, Ermine C, Nisha and Rajiv K with Diyya and Runeil, Estella M, Sunday and Shirley O, Kath P, Diso and Sewak R, Denise S, Leyone S, Natalie and Jyneil W.

In Walsall, pray for the council and voluntary groups co-ordinating volunteers in neighbourhoods willing to help with delivering shopping, food and medical supplies to those needing to isolate themselves completely due to vulnerability, having Covid-19 or having been exposed to it. Pray for those who cannot leave home either to keep themselves or others safe, that they will not feel isolated, lonely or unloved. Pray for those who experience domestic violence, that they would not feel trapped or helpless. Pray for those who inflict violence that God would convict them of their deeds. Continue to pray for those in the front line in medical services, shops and schools, and all those behind the scenes ensuring smooth

logistical running of these services. Pray especially for those whose jobs involve going from house to house – carers, delivery drivers, postal workers – that their own exposure would be minimised and also that they would not be exposing others to the virus.

Again I would encourage you to pray our family prayer regularly, thinking about each clause and what it means today and encourage everyone by lighting a candle to put in the window at 7pm if you can do so safely and praying the grace over each other.

Reassurance for Junior church

I'm not going to tell you a Bible story this week, though I am going to talk about things written in the Bible. Some of you might be scared because of this new virus. Some of you might wonder if God still loves us. Some of you might be asking if this is a punishment from God because we are not good enough.

So I want to tell you some things that the Bible tells us about God that maybe will answer your questions and give you a bit of peace or security. This new virus is dangerous, but so is flu, or measles or a car crash. Because it's new, we are having to stay at home or not go out very often until doctors and scientists have found a way to vaccinate us or have a medicine to help cure us. It is okay to be frightened of dangerous things. If you are, make sure you talk to grown ups who love you, so they can hug you and hold you tight. Before Jesus went back to heaven, He said God the Father would send the Holy Spirit to always be with us, to help us and comfort us. You can tell God you are scared and He will help you!

When times are hard, we can feel let down by people who are more powerful than us. We expect them to always keep us safe and sometimes they can't. We sometimes wonder, if we get hurt or let down, whether that means other people don't love us any more. But bad things do happen, because our world isn't perfect yet. It doesn't mean God doesn't love us. In fact God says in the Bible that he loves us with an everlasting love and that no one can take us from Him. Whether we are well behaved or naughty, whether we are calm or wild, whether we are an adult or a child, God loves us to bits and will never leave us.

God does not punish us for not being good enough. We are called Christians because we follow Jesus Christ, Jesus the promised one. At Easter we remember that Jesus was perfect, but died on the cross as if he was a bad man. That is because God knew we could never sort out our own mess ups or be perfect. Jesus the perfect man made a new covenant (or a new agreement) so that he was punished and we could have a life forever with God. God loves us so much, he rescued us from all our mess ups. So, whatever we might think we deserve from God, Jesus has sorted it out. That means God is not going to punish us now. One day, the whole world as we know it will end and God will finally put everything right and back to how he made it to be. Then people will have to explain why they chose to live God's way or their own way. While we are here, though, we can always know that even when things are really bad, God is with us, loves us and is not punishing us.