

THE GOD WHO COMES DOWN

St Andrew's United Reformed Church – 29th November 2020

A Heartfelt Plea (Isaiah 64: 1-3)

I wonder what your situation is today, what you think of the British nation.

In our reading from the Book of Isaiah,

the prophet saw a time coming when HIS PEOPLE would be in disgrace
and the temple would be trampled down by foreigners.

So he cried out to God for help, to restore their fortunes.

Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down

– that the mountains would tremble before you!

As when fire sets twigs ablaze and causes water to boil,

– make your name known to your enemies and cause the nations to quake before you!

For when you did awesome things that we did not expect,

– you came down, and the mountains trembled before you.

He had a good motive in this – glory for God.

Thus, he cried out on behalf of his people for powerful action.

And we might well follow his example

- appealing on behalf of our nation in its disgrace;
- this used to be a powerful nation, blessed by God,
- now it is weak and insignificant in the world.

The God Who is Seen (4-5)

Isaiah then describes God as the God who is seen – unlike other gods

*Since ancient times no one has heard, no ear has perceived, no eye has seen any God besides
you, WHO ACTS ON BEHALF of those who wait for him.*

You come to the help of those who gladly do right, WHO REMEMBER YOUR WAYS.

And we are reminded that God acts on behalf of those who wait for him,
who remember his righteous ways.

The God Who Gets Angry (5-7)

BUT God also gets angry when people stubbornly stray.

So Isaiah moved on to confession of his people's sins.

But when we continued to sin against them, you were angry.

*All of us have become like one who is unclean, and all our righteous acts are like filthy rags;
we all shrivel up like a leaf, and like the wind our sins sweep us away.*

NO ONE CALLS ON YOUR NAME or strives to lay hold of you;

for you have hidden your face from us and have given us over to our sins.

And again we might well follow Isaiah's example, OUR NATION HAS SINNED GREATLY.

It has adopted significant laws that go against God's ways;

- ➔ most worshippers are found in shopping centres on Sundays
- ➔ worshipping material things rather than God

Laying Hold of God

Isaiah's mention of no one striving to lay hold of God is particularly important.

We need to remember that Isaiah was a Jew.

And the thought of laying hold of God would link to another event.

Isaiah was almost certainly thinking of Jacob wrestling with God at Peniel.

That was when Jacob refused to let go unless God blessed him.

It was an astonishing event – a man wrestling with God and winning!
Which immediately tells us that God wanted Jacob to win.
BUT the question is, are we prepared to wrestle with God?
This is an important point for us regarding prayer.

Are we prepared to wrestle with God in prayer?
Because there is a cost – it will certainly cost us some of our time.
But it may cost more than that – we may need to make significant changes.
It cost Jacob an injury – his hip was dislocated, and he walked with a limp thereafter.
But if we wrestle with God for mercy, salvation, justice and righteousness,
➔ we can be sure God wants us to win!!!

Isaiah Wrestled in Prayer (8-9)

*You, Lord, are our Father, we are the clay, you are the potter;
we are all the work of your hand.
Do not be angry beyond measure, Lord; do not remember our sins for ever.
Oh, look upon us we pray, for we are all your people.*

NOW THE READING STOPPED THERE – BUT TO WHOM DOES ‘WE’ REFER?

- “for we are all your people”
- It is strange that the reading should end there
- Why miss out verses 10, 11 and 12?

Verses 10 & 11

*Your sacred cities have become a wasteland;
even Zion is a wasteland, Jerusalem a desolation.
Our holy and glorious temple, where our ancestors praised you,
has been burned with fire, and all that we treasured lies in ruins.*

‘WE’ CLEARLY REFERS TO THE JEWS – these verses describe the desolation during exile

WE MUST READ WHOLE SECTIONS OF THE BIBLE TO FIND THE CORRECT MEANING

AND I WONDER WHETHER IT DISAPPOINTS YOU

THAT THIS HEARTFELT PLEA – ‘for we are all your people’ –
WAS MADE ON BEHALF OF THE JEWS?

What is the basis for referring to a group as God’s people?
Everyone is made in the image of God – are we all God’s people?

Isaiah made the appeal on the basis of the Jews being GOD’S CHOSEN PEOPLE.

So, much to our relief, Christians can also make this claim, as the Apostle Peter wrote:

*But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God’s special possession, that
you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light.
Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received
mercy, but now you have received mercy. (1 Peter 2:9-10)*

We are God’s people if we are genuinely Christians, grafted into the Jewish ‘olive tree’;
as the Apostle Paul explained in his letter to the Church in Rome.

And There Is Hope (v12)

Even in the darkest situations, because of God's character. Isaiah continued:

*After all this, Lord, will you hold yourself back?
Will you keep silent and punish us beyond measure?*

IS IT CONCEIVABLE THAT GOD WOULD STAY SILENT,
that he would punish them beyond measure?
THAT WOULD BE TOTALLY OUT OF CHARACTER FOR HIM:
he is mighty to save and passionate for his people
and that passion is revealed when we consider other events

Adam & Eve Hid (Genesis 3:8-9)

*And they heard the sound of the LORD God walking in the garden in the cool of the day,
and the man and his wife hid themselves from the presence of the LORD God
among the trees of the garden.*

But the LORD God called to the man and said to him, "Where are you?"

They hid themselves because they had disobeyed God.

But God came down from heaven to talk to them – he didn't stay aloof.

Abraham & Sarah had Visitors (Genesis 18:9-10)

Three 'men' visited Abraham one day.

*They said to him, "Where is Sarah your wife?" And he said, "She is in the tent."
The LORD said, "I will surely return to you about this time next year,
and Sarah your wife shall have a son."
And Sarah was listening at the tent door behind him.*

One of the 'men' was God come down from heaven to talk to Abraham and bring him good news.
Good news about the son and heir for whom he longed.

Jacob Wrestled with God (Genesis 32:26-28)

Then there is that occasion when Jacob wrestled with 'a man' at Peniel.

*Then he said, "Let me go, for the day has broken."
But Jacob said, "I will not let you go unless you bless me."
And he said to him, "What is your name?" And he said, "Jacob."
Then he said, "Your name shall no longer be called Jacob, but Israel,
for you have striven with God and with men, and have prevailed."*

Moses and the Burning Bush (Exodus 3)

Exodus chapter 3 tells of another occasion with a different type of wrestling

*Now Moses was tending the flock of Jethro his father-in-law, the priest of Midian, and he led
the flock to the far side of the wilderness and came to Horeb, the mountain of God. There the
angel of the Lord appeared to him in flames of fire from within a bush. Moses saw that though
the bush was on fire it did not burn up. So Moses thought, "I will go over and see this strange
sight – why the bush does not burn up."*

*When the Lord saw that he had gone over to look, God called to him from within the bush,
"Moses! Moses!"*

God came down from heaven to call Moses to a very special role

- ➔ Moses was quite overwhelmed and most reluctant
- ➔ He didn't agree until the Lord became angry with him!

The Israelites at Mount Sinai (Exodus 19:16-29)

To speak to his chosen people and make a covenant with them.

On the morning of the third day there was thunder and lightning, with a thick cloud over the mountain, and a very loud trumpet blast. Everyone in the camp trembled. Then Moses led the people out of the camp to meet with God, and they stood at the foot of the mountain. Mount Sinai was covered with smoke, because the Lord descended on it in fire. The smoke billowed up from it like smoke from a furnace, and the whole mountain trembled violently. As the sound of the trumpet grew louder and louder, Moses spoke and the voice of God answered him.

The Completed Tabernacle (Exodus 40:33-38)

Then Moses set up the courtyard around the tabernacle and altar and put up the curtain at the entrance to the courtyard. And so Moses finished the work.

Then the cloud covered the tent of meeting, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle. Moses could not enter the tent of meeting because the cloud had settled on it, and the glory of the Lord filled the tabernacle.

In all the travels of the Israelites, whenever the cloud lifted from above the tabernacle, they would set out; but if the cloud did not lift, they did not set out—until the day it lifted. So the cloud of the Lord was over the tabernacle by day, and fire was in the cloud by night, in the sight of all the Israelites during all their travels.

Joshua Met the Heavenly Commander (Joshua 5:13-15)

Now when Joshua was near Jericho, he looked up and saw a man standing in front of him with a drawn sword in his hand. Joshua went up to him and asked, “Are you for us or for our enemies?”

“Neither,” he replied, “but as commander of the army of the Lord I have now come.”

Then Joshua fell facedown to the ground in reverence, and asked him,

“What message does my Lord have for his servant?”

The commander of the Lord’s army replied,

“Take off your sandals, for the place where you are standing is holy.” And Joshua did so.

God Fills the Temple (1 Kings 8:6-11)

The priests then brought the ark of the Lord’s covenant to its place in the inner sanctuary of the temple, the Most Holy Place, and put it beneath the wings of the cherubim. The cherubim spread their wings over the place of the ark and overshadowed the ark and its carrying poles. These poles were so long that their ends could be seen from the Holy Place in front of the inner sanctuary, but not from outside the Holy Place; and they are still there today. There was nothing in the ark except the two stone tablets that Moses had placed in it at Horeb, where the Lord made a covenant with the Israelites after they came out of Egypt.

When the priests withdrew from the Holy Place, the cloud filled the temple of the Lord. And the priests could not perform their service because of the cloud, for the glory of the Lord filled his temple.

These are just the main examples from the Old Testament of God coming down.

- Adam and Eve visited
- Abraham and Sarah visited
- Jacob wrestled
- Moses and the burning bush
- The Israelites at Mount Sinai
- The Tabernacle filled
- Joshua and the Commander
- The Temple filled

When we add these to the coming of the Lord Jesus at the incarnation
– the Eternal Son of God coming as a baby boy –
There is an overwhelming weight of evidence that God will come again, just as promised.

But that leads to the question: WHY WILL HE COME? FOR WHAT PURPOSE?
And context proves to be crucial again here.

The preceding chapter in the Book of Isaiah starts with two questions.

Who is this coming from Edom, from Bozrah, with his garments stained crimson?

Who is this, robed in splendour, striding forward in the greatness of his strength?

And it is the Lord himself striding towards Jerusalem
– having trampled the people of Edom and the nations in his wrath
– in the vision, he was coming in judgment!

The people of Edom were relatives of the people of Israel
– they were descendants of Esau, Jacob's twin brother.
But when the Babylonians conquered Judah with brutal force
– the people of Edom rejoiced instead of mourning.

And so, when we think of the Lord's Second Coming, we need to think!

Our New Testament reading quotes Jesus as saying:

'At that time people will see the Son of Man coming in clouds with great power and glory.

*And he will send his angels and gather his elect from the four winds, from the ends of the earth
to the ends of the heavens. (Mark 13:26-27)*

Which are comforting thoughts for all who believe in the Son of Man.

BUT AGAIN, there is important context in the preceding verses.

Jesus also warns his disciples that

'Everyone will hate you because of me ...'

And that before his return there will come:

*'... days of distress unequalled from the beginning, when God created the world,
until now – and never to be equalled again.'*

So whilst all those who long for righteousness and justice on the Earth
look forward to Jesus' return.

We need to remember the warnings and prepare for the events he describes.

'Laying hold of God' is an excellent way to do this.

For Jesus also said:

'... the one who stands firm to the end will be saved.'

And it is only in his strength that we can stand firm.

Christians worship the God who comes down.

And Jesus will certainly down come again, as he promised.

Let us make sure we are watching and ready!

Taking account of his warnings as well as his promises.

Ready to give an account to those who ask us about the bright hope we have in him.

~~~~~