

ALL SAINTS WESTON

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SANCTUARY & ENGAGE SERVICES

ISAIAH 65: 17 -25

2 PETER 3: 1 – 2 & 8 - 14

NEW HEAVENS & NEW EARTH

OR

KEEPING THE END IN SIGHT

And so the end is in sight both for our series on the book of Isaiah – and the general election campaign. This is the fourteenth and last talk and we have barely scratched the surface in all those studies. Chapter 65 from which we had our reading is also very nearly the end of the book and it gives us a picture of the end of the old order of creation and the beginning of the new order of creation.

During our time spent studying this book, we have climbed with Isaiah up to the mountain top and been led down with him into the valleys. We have encountered the failings of the people of God and the forthcoming disasters that will overtake them. We have seen the promise of restoration, the coming of the suffering servant and of the one who will be the everlasting king and righteous judge of all the Earth. We have been made aware of the sinfulness of people, including the

Prophet himself, but also the way in which God wants to heal his people of both their sins and their illnesses, and make them fully whole in every sense of the word. We have learned that there is refreshment for everyone who is thirsty and that the word of the Lord endures for ever. All that and much, much more. The book is 66 chapters of vivid imagery and poetry with almost every verse being capable of being turned into a sermon.

And our reading today looks forward to that final end and that new beginning. The time when former things are to pass away and to be forgotten and new things are brought to birth.

You know that over the years many people, notably Jehovah Witnesses, have proposed a date for the end of the world. Probably if you asked Isaiah to put an actual date on when this new heaven and earth would be established, he would have pencilled in 5 July 2024 ... that's because on that day, in this country at least,

there will be the dawning of a new age, milk and honey and prosecco will flow though the land, anti-social crime will disappear from our streets, food banks will be a thing of the past, everyone will speak civilly to each other, young people (and old people) will come off social media and will beat their phones into garden hoes. The new Jerusalem will be built without planning restrictions in England's green and pleasant land and of course the New Jerusalem will be a net carbon zero garden city – just as visualised in Revelation 22. All will be well and all manner of things will be well - won't it?

Sadly no.

But before we get too critical or cynical about our leading politicians let's remember that a democracy like ours is a system whereby imperfect voters vote for imperfect reasons for imperfect leaders. Or as Churchill once said, no doubt after he had been out canvassing.

'The best argument against democracy is a five-minute conversation with the average voter'

We the people are part of the problem too!

Even though political leaders want to give us hope, will want us to believe that things can only get better with them, these do not feel like hopeful days or a hopeful election. My guess is that the majority of people in the UK have mostly negative feelings about the outcome of next week's election.

Frustration, confusion, anger, resentment, apathy, cynicism, anxiety, fear and weariness are more in evidence than hope and enthusiasm and a common purpose. If asked to say what is the predominant emotion or feeling prevalent in the country today I would probably say it is ANXIETY

So there is much to be anxious about. I was going to go on list some of those reasons in this country and across the world but I fear I may make you more anxious and apprehensive than you may be already. And you see and hear what is going on as much as I do.

Yes, undeniably there is much to be anxious and fearful about. And yet...and yet.

There is much to be thankful for even in our own day. I don't suppose any of us would willingly swop our lives for that of the majority in nineteenth century urban or rural England. Nor would we swop our situations for the people of Isaiah's day faced with the prospect of the fearsome Assyrians and then the Babylonians sweeping down on them like locusts, slaughtering and carrying away into exile. And the truth is we have come a long way in human society across God's earth to making real that vision of a just civil society that works for everyone.

But there is even more to be thankful for when we bring the power and reality of godly vision into our mindset and thinking. Because a godly vision, a vision based on the character and power of God, a faith based on the narrative of God in creation and God in recreation rises above and sees beyond what we see portrayed daily on our phone and TV screens and in our newspapers. Above the storm clouds of confusion and conflict that leave most people in the fog, the sun of righteousness is still shining. The story carries on.

We have a story and a narrative which is bigger than today's headlines, bigger than today's political leaders – however well-intentioned they may be – bigger than the genuine crises which we face – and for which we all have responsibilities. And central to God's story is humanity. The God who is outside of time and history and yet who came to us in Jesus and who comes to each one of us in all times and all places. We are part of the BIG STORY – which like all good stories has a beginning, a middle and an end.

This passage gives us a glimpse of the kind of world and the kind of society that God is working to bring about and will finally bring about. It is one of many such passages in the Old Testament and New Testament. Some express the glory and beauty of heaven or the music and songs of worship that continually fill the air or multitudes that no one can number. Like the music I heard yesterday in Bath Abbey when 80 or so young voices sang Parry's anthem "I was glad when they said unto me let us go into the house of the Lord." The anthem of all teenagers when being cajoled by their parents to go to church. And no doubt glorious music was soaring to the roof in the Cathedral yesterday at Emma's priesting. But Isaiah's heavenly vision is more earthly than those. This vision captures something of the day to day living on such a new earth. And as such it expresses what a good society looks like.

It will be a place of joy and delight – not anxiety and gloom

I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.

There will be no more tears – well at least not of sadness or grief because *"the sound of weeping and of crying will be heard in it no more.*

Infant mortality whether through illness or war will be a thing of the past. Long life is the order of the day *'the one who dies at a hundred will be thought a mere child'*

Well here is someone who is nearly 100. Here is Rosemary Prudden 99 and eating a 99 to prove it. And on the day of her birthday Pippa took Rosemary to meet up with another 99 year old from our congregation – Mavis Harwood. Here they are

together. Mavis still lives at home on her own but doesn't go out. Rosemary also lives at home on her own and manages to get out. In fact once again she is coming to Lourdes with us again in September and will be doing sterling service co-running the bar with a 70 year old child.

Back to the vision of the new earth. Everyone will have a home of their own to live in which they have built and a garden with good crops. And no heavy mortgages or rents to pay or council tax. Thinking about it I expect heaven will be a tax-free paradise. There will be good honest labour for everyone and people will enjoy their labour. It doesn't actually say there will be no more super-rich and multi-billionaires but I think you could read that into the passage! Children will not be born into a world of danger, of abuse, of neglect and of violence. The wolf and the lamb and the lion and the ox will not be preying on one another but will be happy vegans together.

The prophet Micah, who was a contemporary of the first Isaiah also shared the same vision – maybe they were in a 24-7 prayer meeting together and both wrote it up.

He said

In the last days

*They will beat their swords into ploughshares
and their spears into pruning hooks.*

*Nation will not take up sword against nation,
nor will they train for war anymore.*

*Everyone will sit under their own vine
and under their own fig tree,
and no one will make them afraid.*

What a beautiful vision? So when can we expect to see it?

Well I think the answer in part is now ... and a bit more tomorrow if we will play our part and pray our part as that excellent booklet produced by the CofE for the general election is called. And lastly the vision will be fully and finally realised when the curtain comes down once and for all on this world.

The title that Tom Yacomeni gave for the series, was 'The power of godly vision', and he used an image of spectacles to illustrate that title as we see here. Glasses or spectacles help us to see better. Like many of you I need glasses to see physical things better and I also need glasses to see things spiritually. The physical glasses I use are vari-focals. I use the top half of the lenses for seeing things further away and in the distance and the lower half for seeing things close up. In the blink of an eyelid I can see the page of a six inches from my nose or – on a clear day from my back garden – the top of a Welsh mountain 40 miles away.

So I think it is helpful to approach this passage – as in deed with many passages in scripture – with our spiritual vari-focals. We can see that it points to a destination that is way in the distance. Nobody knows how far into the distance will be that time when the fullness of this vision is realized, when time as we know it stops, when the universe and in particular the earth as we know it is changed into something else. All this will be heralded by an event we affirm later in the service when we say Christ has died, Christ is risen and Christwill come again.

But you may have heard that accusation levelled at some Christians – '*They are so heavenly minded that they are of no earthly good*'. It was first penned by the American medic, poet and humourist called Oliver Wendell Holmes.

That is why we also need to keep our eyes on the here and now – this place, this time and see how the vision that Isaiah saw could be fulfilled.

You might say that the vision of the new heaven and new earth will in effect be the full realization of the kingdom of God on earth. When the gates of time are lifted up and king of glory shall come in bringing with him this new order. But that same king of glory told us to pray '*Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven*'.

Sir Thomas More, once Chancellor to that tyrant Henry VIII, wrote a number of prayers, one of which was very short and went:

The things that we pray for, good Lord, give us grace to labour for: through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There is a kingdom to come and a kingdom to be won.

God told the people of Judah through Jeremiah that they were to seek the welfare of the city that they were going to be exiled to and to pray for it. They were to live and work for the betterment of the people around them whose leaders had carted them off.

In Galatians 6 Paul wrote:

Therefore, as we have opportunity, let us do good to all people, especially to those who belong to the family of believers.

Yes it is especially to our Christian brothers and sisters but not exclusively.

In the parable of the Sheep and the Goats we are challenged to clothe the naked, feed the hungry give refreshment to the thirsty and visit the prisoner

Whether it is a simple or single act of kindness to a neighbour or fighting an injustice on a grand scale; whether it is serving in the Monday Lunch Club at the Hub or being a school governor; whether it is exercising our vote next Thursday or being a local councillor; whether it is not adding to the hateful noises on social media or campaigning for a cleaner, greener world; whether it is leading someone to Christ or serving as a churchwarden - these are all ways in which we help to bring about the kingdom of God in the here and now and in the tomorrow.

Of course the job can never be fully completed but just think how far we have come since Isaiah or the days of Jesus on earth. Yes in some ways people have not changed and terrible things are still done by people but see how the gospel has spread all over the world and what changes have been made to human dignity, to the reduction of infant mortality to the looking after of the disabled, to the advance of freedom. That vision has in part come to pass in a way that I don't suppose Isaiah could ever have imagined, just as we cannot begin to

imagine what like will be like in 100 years if this current age is still going.

So it is now and not yet. It is walking forward with one foot off the ground and one foot planted fully on the ground. In the world but not of the world. It is looking through the top half of our glasses to believe in what is yet to come which is more than we can ever imagine and looking through the bottom half of the glasses to see what is around us now, what has been given to us to do now, what are our responsibilities ow to make God's kingdom on earth come that bit nearer.

ENDING

Let me end with some words from quasi Biblical Book, the Lord of the Rings. They come towards the end of the book when the forces of evil have nearly been defeated and after a terrible battle. **SLIDE:** Frodo and his faithful companion Samwise Gamgee (a bit like Christian and Hopeful in Bunyan's Pilgrim's Progress) have woken up after being rescued in the nick of time. They wake up in a heavenly place called Ithilien. Sam is surprised to be alive. He's surprised to see Gandalf standing in front of him. And Tolkien has Sam say these words:

"Is everything sad going to come untrue? What's happened to the world?"

'A great Shadow has departed,' says Gandalf, and then he laughed, and the sound was like music, or like water in a parched land and as he listened the thought came to Sam that he had not heard laughter ... for days upon days. It fell upon his ears like the echo of all the joys he had ever known. But he

himself burst into tears. Then his tears ceased, and his laughter welled up, and laughing, he sprang from his bed.

‘How do I feel?’ he cried. ‘Well, I don’t know how to say it. I feel, I feel’—he waved his arms in the air—‘I feel like spring after winter, and sun on the leaves; and like trumpets and harps and all the songs I have ever heard!’”

Something like that, something like Isaiah’s vision is promised to all those who will acknowledge Jesus Christ as Lord and Saviour and who will follow him to the end of their days. It is not a hope that any political party or any secular philosophy can hold out. It is the promise of new heavens and new earth. And as that great Christian leader, pastor and writer Tim Keller said:

Everything sad is going to come untrue and it will somehow be greater for having once been broken and lost

But until we pass from this earth or Christ comes again, our task is to make this earth a bit more like the one that is to come.

And when we start our new series on Acts, we’ll see a bit more how that can be done.