

Basingstoke and Reading Circuit: Isaiah Bible Month Week 4 – By Rev'd Martin Beukes

Welcome to worship today. As we gather in chapels, or join in from our homes over the internet, or even as we read this service at another time, we are gathered in worship of the Creator and King who calls us to live within God's kingdom.

Call to Worship: *Psalm 85:9-13 adapted from several translations.*

God's salvation is very close to those who honour him

so his glory can live in our land.

Faithful love and truth will meet;

justice and peace will embrace.

Truth will spring up from the ground;

justice will gaze down from heaven.

The Eternal Giver will grant what is good,

and our land will yield its bounty.

Justice will march before him,

and make a way for his footstep.

Hymn: STF 55 Immortal, invisible, God only wise - Walter Chalmers Smith

<p>Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.</p> <p>Unresting, unhasting, and silent as light, nor wanting, nor wasting, thou rulest in might — thy justice like mountains high soaring above thy clouds which are fountains of goodness and love.</p> <p>To all life thou givest, to both great and small; in all life thou livest, the true life of all;</p>	<p>we blossom and flourish as leaves on the tree, and wither and perish; but naught changeth thee.</p> <p>Great Father of glory, pure Father of light, thine angels adore thee, all veiling their sight; all praise we would render: O help us to see 'tis only the splendour of light hideth thee.</p> <p>Immortal, invisible, God only wise, in light inaccessible hid from our eyes, most blessèd, most glorious, the Ancient of Days, almighty, victorious, thy great name we praise.</p>
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Prayer:

Gracious Lord Jesus, we gather because we have heard the Good News for ourselves and desire deep within to respond to your invitation to be part of God's loving reign on earth.

As we come to worship today, we come bearing our own burdens and anxieties. Our lives are never as simple as they seem to be and seldom as simple as we would like. Open our eyes to your manifold blessings and the thousand tiny ways in which you sustain us. Lift the weight of our worries and fill us anew with your Spirit of grace and truth as we worship you today.

Creator of all and giver of life, we come to worship knowing that you have called us to be your servants in our ordinary daily living. Yet, it seems so often we pursue only the things which we most want in the moment. Too often we fail to consider the impact of our choices on our relationships, our spirit, or our planet. Forgive our carelessness and sin, and open our eyes to see our world, our lives, and every living creature as you do.

May we be servants of the Servant, sharing Jesus' Good News of the Kingdom come and the loving reign of God drawing all creation back toward the life-giving God. Amen

Say the Lord's prayer

Hear Jesus' words of grace which he spoke to all who came searching for God, 'Go in peace, your sin is forgiven.'

Readings: Isaiah 65:17-25 and Revelation 21:1-7

Sermon: A Whole New World

<https://1drv.ms/v/s!ArlgcfuHPC1riNUTUuQmy96duXvGmw?e=SYxpyJ>

I don't think anyone would disagree that we live in a world with far too much pain and suffering. Even if we disregard wars, natural disasters, and the thousands of diseases which debilitate our bodies and minds, there is still too much suffering in our world. Three very real examples, not made to make any of us feel guilty, but to prove a point:

- Most of us are sitting in a Methodist church right now, to worship God and listen to this sermon having used a car, or a bus, or are connecting over the internet using electricity, all of which damage the planet God has given us in sacred trust to care for.
- Most of us are wearing at least one piece of clothing right now which was made in a far-off country by workers who earn pennies an hour.
- And right now, within a mile of where we are sitting, there is almost certainly a mother or father who will choose to go hungry today so that their children won't. This in the 6th largest economy in the world. During the pandemic I spent a little under 18 months doing deliveries for a local food bank one day a week. And you know what I learned? There is too much suffering in our own neighbourhoods!

Isaiah commits a lot of his words to try and show us two pictures: the world is filled with injustice and suffering and because of human disobedience to God's hopes and dreams for humanity, we cause most of it! Isaiah shows us that even God's own people, people who try to live God's way, cause suffering. So much so, that God allows Israel to be dragged of into exile, to experience a long suffering of their own.

I hope that my examples show that we live in an unjust world filled with suffering, and we are complicit in the systems that cause it. Even if we are only complicit by accident, by our perceived lack of power over the systems, or by sheer lack of interest in the unjust systems of our world.

One of my favourite stories is Star Trek. It creates this amazing sci-fi earth where humanity have finally come to discover that our planet has more than enough for everyone, and people now work together to improve life for everyone, to overcome disease, and to explore strange new worlds. But it isn't easy for humanity to come to this realisation. In the story much of the 21st century is overrun by a brutal third world war, where people fight for resources, to save planet from ecological destruction, and ironically, to save the human race from extinction. And their brilliant plan is to do this by killing each other and by spending earth's resources on doing it. Very clever! Anyway, everything changes when an engineer, who tries to get away from all the pain and suffering he desperately tries to drown with cheap liquor every night, invents faster than light space travel. In less than a century there is no hunger on earth, very little disease, and most people are working to build a better world and explore the strange new worlds of the stars! But that is just a fairy-tale, right?

There are two words used in the Bible to describe something like this wonderful and almost unbelievable world without suffering, hunger, or pain: Justice and Peace...

Justice as a concept in the Bible is most often a restorative process, taking steps to change the social structures to prevent injustice. Isaiah spends a lot of his words on castigating Israel for their perpetrating injustice when they were supposed to be a society formed by God, ruled by God, and where every person was valued as God values them. Or maybe to use Jesus' word, "to love others as he has loved us."

Peace as a concept in the Bible is something far more than the absence of war. Rather ‘Shalom’ – the Hebrew word for peace – is the presence of God and God given completeness or wholeness. So, no surprises then, that our exploration of Isaiah brings us at last to the ‘city of Peace,’ Jerusalem. But Jerusalem is not just an ordinary city like Israel had lost when they went into exile. Here it is a God given city which lives up to its name as the City of God-given Wholeness.

This city is what our passage from Isaiah 65 was talking about: “for I will create Jerusalem to be a delight and its people a joy.” Or what Revelation calls “the Holy City, the new Jerusalem, coming down out of heaven from God.” This is a picture of a strange new world right here: All creation restored to God and all people living in Justice and Peace.

This new world of Justice and Peace, of all things made new, without suffering or pain, is what I think Jesus is speaking about when he says again and again, “the Kingdom of God has come near.” The only real problem with the picture of all things made new and Jesus’ invitation for us to be part of it, is we have failed dismally at taking it seriously.

In a brilliant little book called Everything Must Change, Brian McLaren describes how we live as a society within a system so bent on prosperity and security that the system is killing us and our planet under the weight of its drive for more. He argues that one of the reasons for this is because as followers of Jesus, at some point, we have chosen to hear God's promise of all things made new, of Justice and Peace, already given in Isaiah, as simply a promise of what God is going to do at the end. Something we don't have to worry about because God will sort it out later.

Sadly, I think we have lied to ourselves. We have assumed God will do all the work for us by coming with armies, or some such, to overthrow the systems of oppressions and suffering we created. That we perpetuate.

But that is not how Isaiah's readers would have understood his words. They would have expected it to become reality soon; and lived in such a way as to make it more of a reality every day. We know from the New Testament letters that Jesus' first followers expected it to become reality soon; and lived in such a way as to make it more of a reality every day. Why aren't we doing the same today?

Let us Pray. Gracious and Generous Creator God, everything we are given is a gift from you. We know that you desire life to be filled with your Justice and Peace, help us to be a people who live your new world into being right now. Give us courage to face the systems of our world which destroy and exploit, to fight injustice, and to serve your purposes in love. Amen

Hymn: STF 476 One more step along the world I go – Sydney Carter

<p>One more step along the world I go, one more step along the world I go; from the old things to the new keep me travelling along with you: <i>and it's from the old I travel to the new; keep me travelling along with you.</i></p> <p>Round the corners of the world I turn, more and more about the world I learn; all the new things that I see you'll be looking at along with me:</p> <p>As I travel through the bad and good,</p>	<p>keep me travelling the way I should; where I see no way to go you'll be telling me the way, I know:</p> <p>Give me courage when the world is rough, keep me loving though the world is tough; leap and sing in all I do, keep me travelling along with you:</p> <p>You are older than the world can be, you are younger than the life in me; ever old and ever new, keep me travelling along with you:</p>
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Intercessions:

Is there anything you would like to give thanks to God for or is there anything you want to ask prayers for?

Spend a few minutes answering these questions, or if you are leading worship with this service ask them of the congregation. Give thanks for or pray for those things which come to mind or for which people mention.

- *You may wish to thank God for all you have and pray for the poor, the hungry, and the hopeless.*
- *You may wish to thank God for friends and family and pray for those who are lonely, angry, or feel unloved.*
- *You may wish to thank God for the safety and prosperity of our country and pray for people who live in fear, conflict, or desperation.*

Finish with this or similar: Loving God, you have given us life, cared for us in our affliction, and sustained us with energy for every new day, we offer you these prayers we have spoken, and with them the prayers of our hearts which are too close for us to speak out loud. Open our eyes to see as you see, and give us the courage to act on your prompts, and guide us to live as children of your wonderful kingdom. Amen

Hymn: STF 693 God of the poor – Graham Kendrick

<p>Beauty for brokenness, hope for despair, Lord, in your suffering world this is our prayer. Bread for the children, justice, joy, peace, sunrise to sunset, your kingdom increase!</p> <p>Shelter for fragile lives, cures for their ills, work for all people, trade for their skills; land for the dispossessed, rights for the weak, voices to plead the cause of those who can't speak.</p> <p><i>God of the poor, friend of the weak, give us compassion we pray: melt our cold hearts, let tears fall like rain; come, change our love from a spark to a flame.</i></p> <p>Refuge from cruel wars, havens from fear,</p>	<p>cities for sanctuary, freedoms to share. Peace to the killing-fields, scorched earth to green, Christ for the bitterness, his cross for the pain.</p> <p>Rest for the ravaged earth, oceans and streams plundered and poisoned — our future, our dreams. Lord, end our madness, carelessness, greed; make us content with the things that we need.</p> <p><i>Refrain</i></p> <p>Lighten our darkness, breathe on this flame until your justice burns brightly again; until the nations learn of your ways, seek your salvation and bring you their praise.</p> <p><i>Refrain</i></p>
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Blessing: *The Northumbria Community*

May the peace of the Lord Christ go with you,
wherever He may send you.

May He guide you through the wilderness,
protect you through the storm.

May He bring you home rejoicing
at the wonders He has shown you.

May He bring you home rejoicing
once again into our doors. Amen