

Isaiah's world & a Covenant Reflection

28 Dec 20205

Readings:

Old Testament

Isaiah 7:1-14

Epistle

Hebrews 4:14-16

Gospel

Mat 1:18-22 or Luke 1:26-38

Sermon

The pursuit of power and dominance over others is never a peaceful process, for as Lord Acton said in 1887, *power corrupts and absolute power corrupts absolutely*¹ and the pursuit of power inevitably results in violence and bloodshed, which is sadly evident even in modern times. Jostling for power has always been a trait of human behaviour, and strategic alliances between regimes has always been a way of getting power over others.

In the passage of today we learn of a craving for power nearly 3000 years ago. Ahaz was a king of Judah, descendants of David and therefore people included in God's special covenant of love and protection. God would never leave them or stop loving them.

¹ In a letter to Bishop Creighton

² However, a couple of neighbouring kings had formed an alliance to conquer and overcome Judah and replace Ahaz with a puppet head of state so that they could dominate the area of Palestine. These neighbours combined their forces and even marched troops up to Jerusalem but Judah's defences were strangely quite effective and they failed in their bid to conquer (vs 1). The threat was however quite destabilizing for Ahaz and his people were disturbed, skittish and fearful of another attack. God recruited the prophet Isaiah to encourage Ahaz to trust in God's sovereignty and keep calm - the word from God being, that the two attacking armies were just *smouldering stub* or *spent forces* or as we might say – all hot air - and they had already failed. God's word was that and no invasion would take place (vs 4 -7). Ahaz was exhorted to “take heart” and stand firm in his faith (vs 9). However, he remonstrated with Isaiah and instead of heeding the call to trust God and be calm, he preferred to form his own alliance with neighbouring Assyria to bolster Judah's capacity to repel any further attempts by the challengers.

² Gn 12:1-2

Although all of this was around 730 BC one can't help but feel the familiarity of these jostlings for power, with today's instability in the very same region.

Ahaz didn't want to trust God, preferring to trust in in his own scheme. If Ahaz was not going to rely upon God's covenant promise of love and protection and instead, enter into a human military and political alliance with a neighbouring country then, Isaiah's prophecy makes clear there would be consequences (vs 17). Through Isaiah God communicates something that on the face of it seems irrelevant to the situation. A young unmarried woman will give birth to a boy and call him Immanuel meaning *God with us*.³ Isaiah's word refers to this as a hint of, or a pointer to, something yet to come - a clue to a future event. His word is to encourage the hearers to remember what trusting God looks like for people of God because Ahaz and the people appear to have forgotten their faith. The prophecy was given at a public place of gathering for washing and cleaning of clothes and

³ The Hebrew word used has broad and inclusive meaning that could according to context be both a simple general description of a young woman but also the more specific description of a young woman who is a virgin. The Gospel writers using Greek had additional terms to resort to and used the Greek word that specifically referred to *virgin*. See Matt 1:23 & Luke 1:26

garments (see vs. 3), – a public laundry we might say, and there would have been many people within hearing. It is thought that the message about this curious prediction of a young woman and her baby was for the benefit and encouragement of those people rather than for Ahaz, who we might think was a lost cause (see vs. 12).These people would have heard Ahaz reject Isaiah's advice for him to rely upon God, and so they would need some assurance that they were still under God's protection. Their assurance would first be in the young woman's miraculous pregnancy which would come about without any natural process (a virgin conceiving) and then secondly it would be in the name the mother would give the child - Immanuel, which means - *God with us*. Perhaps these foretellings were to remind these people who were really meant to be people of faith, that when God moves, there will be some element in what happens that transcends human understanding. Such would be the pregnancy of a virgin. Then the naming of the baby is a sign that highlights his specialness. Who would be so presumptuous as to call their baby Immanuel (*God with us*) unless the baby's existence was indeed miraculously and marvellously sourced in divine

intervention. God's solutions will be beyond any human ingenuity.

The child's name is a signature that would be written across his life, that he is from God and not from man. His name would be a confronting reminder of God's ancient covenant of love and protection for these people. How could they forget that – or think they could arrange their affairs outside of or independent of the Covenant ?

At his last supper after breaking bread with his disciples, Jesus took a cup and asked them all to drink from it saying that it was *his blood of the new covenant.*

A covenant is not a contract. A contract is an agreement that has performance obligations for both parties that are in balance, flowing two ways giving some form of mutual benefit each to the other which is legally enforceable. In contrast, a covenant releases the flow of benefit just one way, from one party who is a benefactor to the other who is a beneficiary. The flow of benefit is a gesture out of the largess and generosity of the benefactor's resources and is not out of any duty or obligation owed, and so the benefit released under a covenant is a gift.

There is one key thing though that the covenant did require, and that was a worshipful response in thankfulness and gratitude, a voluntary response for a wonderful gift that is bestowed by grace and love. It is not the response to an agreement, a contract, or a negotiated term. It is the response of the heart wherein the people of the covenant would want to do everything at all times to live before God in purity.

*Be holy as I am holy.*⁴

It is only reasonable and surely consistent with common sense to expect people who were beneficiaries of divine protection under a permanent covenant, to live their lives in gratitude and thankfulness to God, and to do their best to maintain purity by heeding the requirements of both the moral and behavioural regulations and rituals of the laws of Moses. Once a year in order to ensure complete purity, the chief priest would make offerings and sacrifices on behalf of the people to cover any transgressions overlooked. Ahaz and his people had let all this slide and

⁴ See Lev 20:26 and many more references

therefore put the flow of any benefit to them under the covenant, at risk.

The new covenant of which Jesus spoke in the last supper was foretold by the prophet Jeremiah (ch 33):

31 “Indeed, a time is coming,” says the LORD, “when I will make a new covenant with the people of Israel and Judah. 32 It will not be like the old covenant that I made with their ancestors..... 33 “But I will make a new covenant with the whole nation of Israel after I plant them back in the land”, says the LORD . “I will put my law within them and write it on their hearts and minds. I will be their God and they will be my people.

Purity under the new covenant would no longer depend on behavioural compliance with a plethora of rules and regulations. Knowledge of how to live with purity before God would be as it says – written - on the hearts and minds of people, a witness planted deep within them that would relieve them of the burden of trying to follow a body of rules and regulations. They would know how to behave and to do the right thing without having to be told – as do we.

The new covenant was soon understood to extend to all people and so by it the gift of God’s promise in the one called

Immanuel *God with* was to cover all humanity ⁵. Thanks be to God !!

Can you see that the new covenant brought an additional blessing that the old covenant didn't. Under the old - living in purity of life as a grateful response to God's promise, was dependant upon the people living in perfect obedience to the laws of Moses, - an impossible task, whereas under the new covenant, the purity of life that brings us to be at one with God is an additional gift – given and not earned. This is a radical shift and leaves us in our day as recipients of the gifts of the New Covenant with no other way to respond than to worship God with thankful hearts. The promise of *Immanuel – God with us*, is sealed and completed in Christ, because not only is Christ the divine priest who represents us in the holiest of holy places to redeem our flaws and failures, but also is himself the actual sacrifice by which our purity is assured. He is the gift, offering by his own life in the most extraordinary act of sacrificial love.⁶ In Christ we are enveloped

⁵ Eph 2:11-22

⁶ Early in the 4th C Augustine argued against the Donatists who believed that the church should live in purity by rigour and discipline, Augustine teaching otherwise that the purity of the church was given as a gift of grace through Christ and that living in purity before God was not through rigour and discipline but through

by the unconditional and permanent love of God with us always, because Christ's purity, perfection and holiness is laid on us as if it was ours.⁷

Drink this all of you for this is my blood of the new covenant shed for you and for the forgiveness of our sins.

How could we ever forget the promise of the new covenant ?

Addition for Advent:

Take Jesus into your life and receive the goodness of God for you. He is no longer a baby in a cradle for He is risen, and by His Holy Spirit is present for us all as a Redeemer who saves us from ourselves, a comforter who walks with us and shows us how to love ourselves, a healer who is like ointment on our wounds, a friend who walks our path with us, a guide who points us in the right direction, an inward voice of conscience and correction, and a power to enable us to live in a new way.

God's grace travels with us in so many ways and not the least in the worship of the eucharist which is Christ's own gift to us to ensure we don't forget – giving to us a *perpetual memory of his precious death.*⁸

worship and thankfulness and “*therefore the church has room for sinners* .(See For all the Saints: Anglican Church August 28th).

⁷ See Hebr 7:22-28

⁸ See 1928 Prayerbook p 42: *Consecration*

Thanks be to God