

Lent 3, March 23rd, 2025

6.00 Holy Communion with healing prayer

Isaiah 55.1-9

May the words of my mouth and the thoughts of all our hearts be now and always acceptable in your sight, O Lord, our strength and our redeemer.

The reading we have just heard, from Isaiah 55, contains a prophecy that was first uttered around 2500 years ago. The early part of that book contains prophecies that predict that Jerusalem will fall, and Judah would be taken into exile in Babylon, so somewhere around 600B. It is from this prophet that the book takes its name. The second part of the book, by disciples of the original Isaiah, addresses the Jews in exile and promises their restoration, so dates from about 550BC and as far as we can tell the third part of the book, from which our reading comes, is addressed to the Jews who have returned, perhaps 530BC or so. It seems to suggest that the returnees have settled down to a rather humdrum existence, mainly concerned with providing for their physical needs, and the excitement of the return from exile seems to have dissipated. The prophet calls on them to look up from their day to day affairs – to look for bread, wine and milk without price – the knowledge and the presence of God in their midst, because it is that which gives life, that which gives a satisfaction that lasts longer than filling the belly. He urges them to consider again the point and purpose of the Jewish people, because the Lord has chosen them, and has given them kings in the line of David, with whom he has made an everlasting covenant. The prophet refers to God as the Lord, the Holy One of Israel. He is uniquely Israel's God. He finally calls on the people to earnestly seek God, to repent of the sins and unrighteousness into which they seem to be falling once more, and look again for the purposes of God – because his ways are higher than their ways; his thoughts higher than their thoughts.

These words were treasured and preserved by the followers of the prophet, as they seemed to have more than just a significance for one particular time, and they became part of the Jewish scriptures. The thoughts they contain were taken up by Jesus in his ministry, and we can see in Jesus' teaching echoes of many of the themes in our reading. In the temptation story, Jesus counters the devil's arguments using the words

One does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of God. (Matthew 4.4)

From John chapter 4

'Everyone who drinks of this water will be thirsty again, 14 but those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4.11-14)

And a little later from John 6

I am the bread of life. Whoever comes to me will never be hungry, and whoever believes in me will never be thirsty. (John 6.35)

And Jesus frequently speaks of himself as the Messiah, the Son of David, the one through whom God's promises will become a reality. The words in our readings were clearly of importance to him.

But the words of the prophecy aren't just relevant to the time they were spoken; neither are they just a foreshadowing of the ministry of Jesus. The church has accepted them as holy scripture, as a way in which the prophetic voice of 2500 years ago continues to speak down the ages. They are as relevant to us today as when they were first spoken. So often we find ourselves totally taken up by the humdrum, the demands of our day to day life, the trip to Tesco, the need to clean the house and dig the garden, even perhaps the need to clean up church after the lighting project. And whilst all these are important, the words of the prophet are a call for us to lift up our heads, and look to God. Because now, as it was when the words were first spoken, it is through God, and more specifically through Jesus, that we find true nourishment and sustenance, the bread from heaven and the living water, that enables us to cope with the sometimes difficult and complex world that we live in. The words are a call then to prayer and worship, to be about the things of God day by day. But the words also give us a broader view. As the Jews had to be reminded that they were God's people with an enduring and eternal destiny, so too we need that reminder. We, the church, are central to God's plan for the salvation, the making whole of the world, and our destiny too is an eternal one. When Jesus described himself as the bread of life, he went on to talk about raising his followers on the last day. Our destiny is to be raised to life from the grave, to find our eternal purpose with our Lord in heaven. That is something we really need to keep hold of as we go through our day to day lives. And finally there is the call that we continually need to hear, to seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near; to let go of our petty sins and selfishness that so often binds us, to return to the Lord, time and time again, asking for mercy; to return to our God, for he will abundantly pardon.

So the words of the prophet still speak – a call to lift up our heads, to seek the life that flows through Jesus, to know again in our hearts the promise of eternal life and to live lives worthy of that, the highest, calling.

For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen