

There is a story told about a multi-millionaire entrepreneur on holiday by the sea and he comes across a fisherman dozing in a chilled fashion by his boat.

“Why aren’t you out there fishing?” he said.

“Because I’ve caught enough fish for today”, the fisherman replies.

“So why don’t you catch more fish than you need?”

The fisherman thought for a minute. “What would I do with them?”

“You could sell them. Earn more money. Buy more nets. Catch more fish. Make more money. Buy more boats. Employ more people. Get really rich, like me.”

The fisherman thought for a minute. “What would I do then?”

“You could sit down, relax and enjoy life”, said the entrepreneur

The fisherman said, “What do you think I’m doing now?” ---

That’s a joke, or perhaps even a parable about contentment. And perhaps comes at an appropriate time in this season of Advent when adverts on the tv, billboards & glossy magazines are all seeking to persuade us that this Christmas isn’t complete without a whole catalogue of extras

We seem to always want what we haven’t got. We seem to be always striving for more: more money, more success, more things, more stuff. Why do we allow ourselves to be programmed in that way? Why do we fill our lives with attachments?

It’s the question the writer asks in verse 2 of our beautiful Isaiah reading: “Why spend money on what does not satisfy? Why spend your wages and still be hungry?” Because of course, it’s a hunger broader than a desire for food that is being spoken of here. No matter how much we achieve, no matter how much we possess, we seem hungry for more.

But here, God through His prophet Isaiah is saying; **“I’m it. I’m all you need”**

It’s a beautiful reading – the inspiration for many hymns & choruses written over the years. It provides it’s original hearers & us all these years later, with lots of images of God carrying out & delivering on His promised steadfast love to His people;

His **P**rovision - I’m the source of these good things to eat and drink

His **P**rotection – nations you don’t know will run to you

His **P**ower - my word will accomplish that which I purpose

This reading also serves as an illustration to how we need the Old Testament to flesh out our picture of the saving works and the heart of God that lead us towards the traditional Christmas story. That’s why in Advent – the run up to Christmas day, we spend time looking at the Word of God in the Old Testament, whereby the 2 themes of; Promise and Hope, weave through the books and chapters.

As we were reminded last Sunday – as found in Genesis, God enters into a covenant with Abraham and Sarah, promising that they would have many descendants, who would live in their own land.

This hope and promise of their own land, was of great importance; social anthropologists describe it as “the material basis of existence” in both the ancient and pre-modern world. Indeed, it continues to be a major consideration in the modern world too.

It was a central theme and promise after the American Civil war, that all citizens, including freed slaves, should be offered 40 acres and a mule as pioneers.

Well just as Individual citizens, so for the whole of Israel.

This promise continues through the period of the prophets, where they proclaim God's dream of world of **justice** and **peace**;

Proclaimed both through the time of the Monarchy (never part of God's original plan ; "We want a king" – "you don't need one, you've got Me" x3

"We want a king" – "ok then, but don't say I didn't warn you"

and equally significantly during times when the Jewish homeland had been under the rule & occupation of one empire after another.

So (& just imagine how this would feel if it was part of the experience of our country) :- apart from a 100 year period that ended 60 years before Jesus was born, the prophet's messages of justice & peace were addressed to a community that had been occupied by foreign rulers for the best part of 600 years up until Jesus' time.

These lovely words are delivered when God's people are in a real mess. The country of Israel had been taken over by another foreign country. The temple in Jerusalem, the beating heart and centre of the Jewish faith, had been destroyed, and to make things even worse, - many of the Jews themselves were being held in exile (hostages if you like) across in the country of Babylon.

So much for the promise from God about them being a great people on their own land, they could have been tempted to think.

And yet, in the midst of this despair God's prophet Isaiah comes onto the scene and provides a message of hope, - hope that things will be OK, but only if God's people return back & stay true to Him,

"Incline your ear, and come to me; listen, so that you may live.

I will make with you an everlasting covenant" v3

If the deal (the covenant as 1st given to Abraham) between God & humankind is kept, Israel staying true to God & following Him, - they will know his protection - and indeed the later verses referring to *"Going out in joy & being led forth in peace"* refer to a future triumphant return from exile back to Jerusalem.

If – then all would end up (as they say in all good stories) happy ever after. Happy ever after?, well, **Yes** and **No**

Yes – because there was a triumphant return to Jerusalem, and in fact the temple was rebuilt

But also **NO** – because Israel never really became the people that God wanted them to be. God's intention was that Israel through the promise of the covenant, would show that sticking true to God & experiencing his provision & protection, & be a witness to God's power & supremacy to the rest of the world's nations. Witnessing, in the hope that all those other countries would turn to him too

The trouble was that despite the brilliant covenant promise they had been given

They couldn't stay true to God and live the way He wanted them to.

Just like the Doctor Doctor joke.... Doctor Doctor – I feel like I'm invisible.....?
Next Please !

That's how God must have felt Invisible & ignored

Despite sending prophet after prophet to shake up and change Israel's ways, He was ignored and Israel failed to become the nation by which their witness would show the whole world, that their God was the only God,

Instead it took another approach – the sending of God's son Jesus (which of course we anticipate at the end of our waiting in Advent on Christmas Day), whereby the whole of the world could see what the heart of God looked like, & where women and men, Jews and non Jews, could through Jesus, experience God as we were intended, and take up on a renewed promise, that we can be part of his family, in this life and the next.

Whilst we acknowledge the word of God, in the Old Testament, it took the "Living Word" a title ascribed to Jesus, to bring God's own hopes to be fulfilled, though it came at a cost (as we will shortly commemorate when we remember at communion around our Lord's table).

And finally, where are we I wonder with our own hopes & longings at this time of Advent. For the season of Advent can I know can be a bitter-sweet time of waiting.

The people of God received through Isaiah received an amazing message of hope, relating the **Power, Protection and Provision of their God**, but in the short term, their situation wasn't to change. They received hope for the future, but still had to live in a hard present.

You see, whereas there is a guaranteed timeline that Advent will end and Christmas will arrive, that isn't necessarily the case for the other things we wait for in hope.

Some of us that I pray with regularly, wait for, and would love to find paid employment, but it's a seemingly long wait

Others are worn down by the level and disruption of the regeneration works around here which have been going on for ages, & where the promised hope of a great improvement seems a lot less clear than before.

(in our church kitchen I noticed the out of order sticker on the water boiler installed as a gift by S4B , but which broke down after 3 hours in September & still hasn't been replaced - which seem a bit like a current metaphor for how things are going)

Of course we wait with hope and anticipation here in church for the fruits of our refurb drive, when we can make a start on some of the areas God has excited us about. We have actual plans, its been brilliant to see funds coming in as a demonstration that God is with us on the journey, but as it has always been an exercise of faith (& way beyond what we could hope to achieve in our own strength and means, we remain still dependent on Him to see the journey through

Others have more personal hopes; regarding friends or family members, and the situations in which they find themselves in, where we & they would dearly like to see change, On our street, in our school or college, work place or wherever we find ourselves

And yet in all of these situations, light shines in the darkness and the darkness does not overwhelm it.

Perhaps we simply have to let God be God, & place our trust in him. In our waiting, we could do worse than take as a guide the attitude of the fisherman whose story we started with.

Let's Pray

Isaiah 55 (read)