

Isaiah 3.1- 4.6

Judgement and Hope

Some years ago Dr Tokunbuh Adeyemo, one of Africa's most respected Christian leaders, gave a lecture at Oak Hill entitled 'Is Africa cursed?' He outlined all the advantages that Africa has over other continents. But despite all its resources Africa has some of the greatest poverty in the world. I am not sure that he ever answered his initial question, but he concluded that the reason for the lack of economic prosperity in Africa was primarily down to a lack of leadership. Whereas there had been a generation of revolutionary pioneers they had not been followed by efficient builders to develop the countries, to bring order and prosperity.

The situation he depicted is very similar to what we see in this chapter of Isaiah.

1. When God's people abandon him leadership fails 3. 1-12

Isaiah speaks of the judgement of God coming to Israel not in terms of destruction from external forces, but the total collapse of all levels of political and social leadership. This is not really surprising. Israel was called to be the people who revealed the nature of the true God into the world. They were called to restore the pattern that had been given in Eden before the Fall – man under God leading and developing the world. God had given them leadership that brought them out of captivity in Egypt – Moses. Then there was Joshua to lead them into the land of promise. David became the ideal king and in Solomon's time the extent of the kingdom was greater than at any other time in the nation's history. Men who led and ruled understanding that they were acting in accordance with the will of God. Good leadership brought blessing to the nation and others, After Solomon it was generally downhill with a few

exceptions. The books of Kings and Chronicles depict the ways in which kings failed to be faithful to God. Many of them died violently. Their faithlessness was copied throughout the kingdoms and now this is coming home to roost. It is not just the failure of the top leadership but throughout society there is a lack of real leadership. Those who became leaders were inadequate to the task. There were so few candidates for high office that anyone who seemed to be any better than others – better clothes for example – people tried to coerce into leadership.

Now we must be careful when we seek to apply this to our own situation and not wrench what Isaiah says out of its time and context. I don't think we can interpret Isaiah's words as saying that with Theresa May as Prime Minister Britain is clearly under the judgement of God. Israel in Isaiah's time was male led. The only recent example of female leadership was the evil Athaliah who had seized power after her son's death and acted like Lady Macbeth. Yes there had been heroic women in the history of Israel, but so often their acting happened at a time when male leadership had failed. We may think of Deborah or Jael in the time of the Judges or Judith in a later period. But here the picture is of women being oppressors and a symbol of the failure of proper leadership in Israel.

Leadership in society or church is necessary. A departure from the righteous living in a nation or gospel centeredness in the life of the church will bring poor leadership. It is a natural result of such a rebellion against God's revealed purposes of nations and churches. Politicians live without principles and become pragmatists pursuing any policy that will gain them popularity. And in church life it can become even more disastrous when the leaders are no longer governed by the Word of God, but are just keeping a religious organisation ticking along or serving their own ambitions.

2. God takes his people to court 3. 13 - 4.1

We need to note that when God enters into judgement he does not accuse Israel of a lack of religious activity, but rather of social injustice – crushing the people and grinding the face of the poor. If we are Biblical Christians we will not support policies in society that crush the poor and needy. We will be concerned about those who suffer in a society that treats refugees harshly and accepts the unjust treatment of those who can't provide for their own needs. It is always encouraging to see the success of events like Sports Aid to raise money for worthy causes and to see the willingness of members of society to give. But that is no substitute for the seeking of a just and fair society not just in words, but in reality. And as we pray for nations that struggle economically, like those in Africa, we must pray that they will have leaders who seek the well-being of their people rather than their own aggrandisement.

And then God turns to the daughters of Zion. In the midst of poverty and injustice they are concerned about their own adornments and their sexual attractiveness. Their priority is themselves. And God pronounces a judgement upon them that will see all that they have gathered taken away for them and a time of deprivation coming to them. Israel will be defeated in war and so many men will be killed that women will try to grab any available man to make him their husband. Desperate housewives indeed!

Now recognising again that God is speaking to the people that he redeemed from slavery and made into a kingdom of priests to declare his glory to the nations and that our nation does not have the same role in God's purposes, what lessons should come to us? We should be thinking about our personal priorities in life. Are we concerned for the poor? Are we in any way living like the women depicted here? Isaiah speaks of coming judgement, but his overall purpose is to call people to repentance. The sad part of the story

will be revealed in Chapter 6 when it becomes clear that the nation will not repent and judgement will come in the destruction of the nation and exile to Babylon. But for us the call comes again. As we hear the word of God are we examining ourselves and asking whether any of the sins that the prophet mentions here are also our sins?

But what of ourselves as a church with a similar calling to that which was given to Israel as the people of God? Are we being a light to the nations and glorifying God in all we do? With faithful ministry that brings the word of God clearly to us, are we becoming the people God wants us to be in Stevenage today? We may give thanks that we are not deprived of leadership as the people of Isaiah's day, but are we responding to that leadership with repentance and faithfulness?

3. The Branch of the Lord will come 4. 2-6

Whenever we read the OT we are faced with an unfinished story. We have the conundrum of a God who wants to bless Israel and an Israel that keeps rebelling against him. It is the tension of the book of Isaiah. Sin must be dealt with. Persistent sin will bring punishment. But our God is not a God who shuts people in prison and throws away the key. His purposes to have a people for his own possession with whom he can dwell will not ultimately be frustrated whatever the sins of the people. We will have to wait until we get to Isaiah 53 before we see the full explanation of how God will be both just and the justifier of the unrighteous.

But here we have the first indication that God is going to act. Elsewhere the coming Messiah, for that is whom Isaiah is talking about, is described as the branch of David, but here his divine origin is emphasised as he is designated the Branch of the Lord. Even as judgement roles over Judah, there are survivors, the remnant. We have seen them back in v. 10 – the innocents who will eat the fruit

Isaiah 3-4 Judgement and Hope St Nicholas Stevenage
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of their labours. They will be called the holy ones; they are given life; the filth of their sin is washed away. The Spirit's cleansing and refining work will take place. God will again dwell with his people with cloud and fire symbolising his presence as he did when the tabernacle was erected, but now it will be for the whole people to enter and not just the priests. The marriage canopy will be set up as Israel becomes the bride of the Lord.

It is appropriate that we arrive here on Palm Sunday. Behold your king comes to you lowly and riding upon an ass. Here is our Saviour coming to bring in his kingdom as he deals with sin on the cross and gives new life to his people in his resurrection. If we know not only Isaiah's prophecy but also the reality in Christ Jesus, how we should rejoice that we have such a God who takes sin seriously, but is full of mercy and grace. All praise to his name.
Amen