

St Nick's Stevenage

George Parsons Sunday 6th May

Isaiah 9: 1- 7

Do you remember the game 'would you rather'? I remember it as a child's book, by John Burningham, growing up to the refrain of ridiculous and horrible choices, like 'What would you rather: 'drink snail squash or eat mashed worms?' Would you rather help a witch to make stew? Or tickle a monkey?'

Of course, as you get older, so the possibilities grow and grow. It makes for a great conversation starter, so 'conversationstartersworld.com' has a list of loads of examples. Some are fun:

- 'Would you rather always be 10 minutes late or always 20 minutes early?'
- 'Would you rather lose all of your money and valuables or all of the pictures you have ever taken?'

Some are more revealing:

- 'Would you rather find your true love, or a suitcase with a million pounds?'

Yeah, give me my true love every time! It's a good game. But it highlights a serious point: that sometimes we have to choose. Sometimes life rolls the dice and we have to choose between two courses of action. And sometimes that choice is a matter of survival. Do remember that scene in Indiana Jones and the Last Crusade - where he has to choose the cup? For Indiana Jones, it was a matter of life or death. More seriously, when the Supreme Court decided earlier in April that Alfie Evans *wasn't* being kept unlawfully at Alder Hey hospital in Liverpool, and that his parents couldn't appeal the decision, they weren't just putting the future of Alfie's care back into the hands of the hospital, they were also making a decision that, it seems, assumed the certainty of Alfie's death.

Background

We've seen over the last couple of weeks that Israel faced a choice that was also a matter of survival. A 'Would you rather' from God. Back at the start of chapter 7, it was Ahaz, King of Judah who had to make the choice - 'what would you rather, Ahaz, trust me? Or make an alliance with Assyria?' It was a time of peril - of fear because King Rezin of Aram had made an alliance with the Northern kingdom of Israel, and they were on their way to attack Jerusalem. And in the face of that fear, that threat, there was a clear choice. God said 'would you rather trust me, or go it alone...'. To help Ahaz make that decision, God gave him a sign in the form of one of Isaiah's sons Shear-Jashub - 'a remnant will return', giving Ahaz confidence that God would not let his people be wiped out...but Ahaz chose poorly. In the face of deadly peril, of fear, he chose to go it alone and reject God.

And, strikingly, though his choice was made alone, it's clear that the whole nation of Israel was implicated in the outcome. For the perilous results of that decision were guaranteed by God in two further signs: two further children - another of Isaiah's, Maher-Shalal-Hash-Baz - 'quick to the plunder', a sign that - as a result of Ahaz's rejection of God Assyria would plunder Jerusalem - and in between the two sons, another son, born of the virgin, Immanuel - God with us; both a sign of judgement - that in bringing the King of Assyria against Jerusalem, God would be 'with his people', but in judgement; and a sign of hope - for the remnant, that God would be with them to deliver them.

And in chapter 8 Isaiah himself was to be a sign for the people, faithfully trusting God rather than turning to mediums. While everyone else was turning away, Isaiah was to cling on. See 8:17 - such a key verse. And what of the people? Chapter 8 also shows the result of their rejection of God, summarised in 8:22 - all that was left for them was distress, darkness, and fearful gloom.

Chapter 8 ends in a dark place: Ahaz, and Israel rejecting God - and so under the wrath of God.

What ch 9 meant for Isaiah

The only hope is in Isaiah himself, who in 8:17 is - singlehandedly - trusting God, waiting for him.

What of the nation? Is there no more hope?

- Enter chapter 9. God hasn't finished with his people yet. And so He gives a promise - through Isaiah - of a new era of hope for God's people, an era marked by rule of yet another son - unlike Ahaz who is a good King. These verses are all about the *reign* of another son - the son-King. Do you see how verses 1 -5 lead up to the 'For' of verse 6. So for Isaiah, ch 9 was a vindication of his faith, an encouragement to go on putting his trust in God in the darkness.

What ch 9 meant for Israel

For Israel, ch 9 was also a sign of grace: a sign that God hadn't finished with them yet. And perhaps intended for individual Israelites to turn away from their unbelief and put their trust in God.

What ch 9 means for us

Matthew quotes the opening of chapter 9 in Matthew 4:15 - 16, showing tht Jesus is the fulfilment of these verses - he is the king of which they speak. We know that this is King Jesus.

So, this chapter presents us with the most important 'would you rather' - put yourself under the reign of king Jesus, or reject him? One lesson of Ahaz's rejection of God was that the people fell with him; see - you stand or fall with the King you serve...

The choice is very stark today. Even in fear, anxiety and uncertainty,

Put yourself under the wonderful rule of God's son and go on trusting His eventual victory.

To do that, we need to see how wonderful the rule of this son is...

These verses highlight three aspects of that reign. In verses 2 - 5 we see the Blessings of King Jesus; in verse 6 describes the Person of King Jesus; and verses 7 - 9 describe the reign of King Jesus.

1 - (Live under) The Blessings of King Jesus (2-5)

Verses 2 - 5 state four blessings that this King brings:

Light (2) - Expectations

'The people walking in darkness have seen a great light'

- this is about *expectation*. The people of Israel could only expect darkness; it's a metaphor for God's favour - Israel could only expect the withdrawal of God's favour; God's anger and cold shoulder; but Jesus brings *light* - that is, a future lived in the sunshine of God's smile, his blessing.

Everywhere where God is *not* is dark; where He *is* is light

Joy (3) - Experience

'You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy'

the Israelites could only know distress; because of the withdrawal of God's favour. But, if we know God's presence, then that can bring joy - even in circumstances that are difficult and uncertain. Because we have someone who is able to help, and willing to help. v. 3 speaks of Joy at the 'harvest' - about provision, and blessing. God who is able to provide for us.

Liberation (4) - Circumstances

'shattering the yoke' of Midian, of the oppressor'

- Israel in Isaiah's time was living at the mercy of other more powerful neighbours; the Midianites were one such people, defeated on two separate occasions - once in Numbers 31 by Moses, and again in Judges 7 by Gideon. It might be the latter occasion in view here, as God arranged it so as to show the weakness of Gideon and the strength in rescuing.

Justice (5) - Relationships

- warrior's boot and soldier's uniform burned coz fighting and war are no longer needed, as the king Himself administers justice

1 - (Live under) The Blessings of King Jesus (2-5)

Light - expectations

Joy - experience

Liberation - circumstances

Justice - relationships

- what kind of ruler do you think Jesus is? A tyrant? Someone who will spoil your life, limit your choices? No. A John put is, in Him is *life*. To know him is to know life in expansion, to know a richer life. If you're not a Christian, why wouldn't you want to know Him, like this? Live for money and it will ruin you; live for Christ and he will bless you.

Christian, even in the midst of turmoil and absence, these things are true. So you can have a good expectations, even if things are dark, because King Jesus promises to bring good from bad; light from dark. Trust him for that. You can joy - even in sadness - because the love and power of Christ transcends whatever darkness you are in. You can know a change in your circumstances - as you bring them to Christ, seeking to live for Him in them; and you can know relationships restored, the end of arguments. Difficult relationships can be healed with the help of Christ.

- Some of these blessings are found in found in the church - church is a family of restored relationships.

- Some are accessed by prayer. Jesus wants us to pray about the things that trouble us, about the things that make us afraid. And we can be bold. Remember when Jesus says: 'what do you want me to do for you?'

Put yourself under the wonderful rule of God's son and go on trusting His eventual victory.

1 - (Live under) The Blessings of King Jesus (2-5)

2 - (Rest secure in) The Person of King Jesus (6)

Verse 6 describes the person of this King, in four names. They are four couplets that together tell us about the personality, the character, of this King. And they are all fulfilled in King Jesus:

Wonderful Counsellor - this is about the King's wisdom; the 'Counsellor' is not as we would use it - like a good listener - but it's a quality in the Bible associated with Kings. They are wise, using their head, able to make good and sound decisions. And Christ is the wonderful counsellor - His wisdom is amazing, beautiful, attractive. He knows the score - knows the details, and can see objectively everything to make the best and wisest decisions.

Mighty God - this is about the King's power. He is mighty - this is about what He can accomplish, what kind of resources He has. And this King is utterly able; utterly powerful. Striking, this King will be mightier than any man, because He is no man - He is God. Where is that fulfilled? Only in Christ - who is God. Here is someone with absolute power. Here is someone with great power - Someone to hide behind. I was told recently that in Bhuddist and Hindu temples there is traditionally stone statues placed outside the temple, usually armed - they are guardians, to protect the god of the temple inside. King Jesus is different - He needs no protection, no guardian - for He is mightier than any foe, even death even hell.

Everlasting Father - this speaks of the king's care for his people, for his ongoing love, concern, condescension. This is an expression of the king's heart - His love for his people, treating them like children. And not like a Father who gives up when it gets hard; no - this King is the Everlasting Father - always caring, always available. This is the King that Christ is - His love is wonderful, intimate; He knowing us completely, but committed to us absolutely.

Prince of Peace - this is the King's character, his disposition. He is marked by peace, by gentleness. and his rule brings peace, and in his 'princely rule' he works for and extends peace. Come under the reign of this King and your life will be more and more marked by peace.

See, be ruled by this King, and you have one who is sufficient for you, in every way.

2 - (Rest secure in) The Person of King Jesus (6)

What's your need?

- guidance? A decision you don't know what to do, which way to go?
- help? IS there a big problem, or a powerful person in your life whom you can't face?
- love? Do you need care? Have you been let down, and you need a faithful friend?
- Peace? Is your life broken, in pieces?

2 - (Rest secure in) The Person of King Jesus (6)

= what do you rest secure in? What do you look for wisdom; power; intimacy; mercy? As you look to the future, what do you daydream about? What do you long for? Security in houses, finances, pension? Those are good - but they're not certain. And they won't make the aching go away - there's always something more.

But Christ is enough. Let Him be your security. Let Him be the one you delight in, that hope in, whose power and sufficiency you look to as you face the future.

Put yourself under the wonderful rule of God's son and go on trusting His eventual victory.

2 - (Rest secure in) The Person of King Jesus (6)

3 - (Trust in) The Reign of King Jesus (7)

There are four aspects to the reign of God's King described here.

Peaceful - 'of the greatness of his government and peace' - character

Note that this is a king in David's line - as Jesus was - so a direct comparison with the Israelite kings is intended. No more the war of the Israelite kings; no more the insecurity of knowing whether your borders are under attack; no more the strife of hostile neighbours; no more the fear of war

Eternal - 'there will be no end' - length

No more the death of temporary Israelite Kings; no more insecurity of wondering whether your King will be toppled by a more powerful neighbour.

Just - 'justice and righteousness' - quality

No more selfish rule, kings out for their own agendas, or ruling oppressively.

Certain - 'zeal of the Lord' - trustworthiness

We see some of this realised; but not all - there is a 'not yet'. As Hebrews 2:8,9 puts it - 'In putting everything under Him, God left nothing that is not subject to him. Yet at present we do not see everything subject to him. But we do see Jesus...'

Live under his reign now; and wait for it to be realised

- now and not yet

NB what kind of ruler is Christ?

Stalin oppressed in the name of liberty- May 5th Marx's birthday - not like Jesus - real freedom

Put yourself under the wonderful rule of God's son and go on trusting His eventual victory.

There are two types of people here:

i) You know that you're living under Jesus' reign.

This is what it means to be a Christian. Not a Christian just because you come to church each week, or come to Reloaded, or that you're confirmed. To be a Christian is to put yourself under the reign of Jesus. And have to do that because naturally live under our own reign - we are the king of our own lives; but Christ deserves to be. Though like Israel, our natural rejection of God means that we too deserve the darkness of God's punishment; Christ died, taking that punishment in Himself; so that we can know the light of His rule. So He invites you this morning to put your hands up in surrender: admitting to Him that you are living your own way, and surrendering to Him - giving Him your life. Feels scary - but what a wonderful King He is. Have you done that? Crucial that we decide.

We talk of 'faith is journey or a process' but no - there has to come from a moment of decision - like Ahaz, we either to trust, or reject.

I want to give you a chance to formally do that today.

Christian, let me talk to you - if you know that you have given your life to Christ. Christian: have you given the government of your entire life over to King Jesus? Are you trying to take back control over some area? Are you resisting? Remember how *good* this King is...what blessings He gives... go on doing so, and see how wonderful the blessings are.

We often resist Christ precisely because we are afraid. Perhaps you are in some situation of uncertainty? Of anxiety? Then come again to Jesus this morning, see how sufficient he is for you. Hide behind his power; come to Him in prayer, asking for wisdom.

Are you in a 'would you rather' situation? Situation of temptation big: ...non-Christian relationships? Struggling with pornography? Or more garden variety...what are you going to do with your summer? What are you going to spend your money on? What are you going to aim for in your career, or in the next stage of my career? Live under Jesus' reign - where there is blessing, security, peace.

Would you rather - live for Christ? Or not? I want to live for Him. I want to make Him my joy. I hope you do to. Will you pray with me.