



Isaiah series beginning October 27th 2013 - An overview for small group members

Introduction to the Book of Isaiah

For 5 weeks, beginning October 27th 2013, the preaching and small group studies will be looking at some passages from the Old Testament book of Isaiah.

Handel's Messiah has made some of the passages of Isaiah known all over the world and for the classically and musically minded it is hard to hear familiar readings of Isaiah without thinking of the tune with lines such as:

- comfort ye my people (Isaiah 40. 1,2) and
- the voice of him that crieth on the wilderness (40.3)

A reading such as 'The virgin will be with child and give birth to a son, and they will call him Immanuel, which means God with us' can bring a sense of Christmas, the smell of candles, and Christmas trees and the singing of 'Once in Royal David's City'.

Now is our opportunity to explore the book from which those much loved passages come - a book rooted in the reality of a very broken world and the reality of the transforming presence of God. As we approach the Advent and Christmas season with this book, we can be helped to see the coming of God in the past, present and future, bringing to us and all the world amazing hope and light amidst much darkness.

The book of Isaiah is a collection of different sorts of writing – from speeches, prophetic messages, and imaginary court scenes to songs. It is also rooted in history. It brings us the message that God is at work in the story of nations and communities as well as individuals.

Down the centuries this book has given Christians spiritual gems that have helped them on their journey of faith. It is a book full of passion for God and as a result compassion for the world. God looks for the fruit of love for him in love for our neighbour. It is a call to the prodigal people to come home to God, to his plan, purpose and promises waiting to be fulfilled and to bring God's transformation to the world through us.

Background

Isaiah is one of the largest books in the Bible. Isaiah greatly influenced John the Baptist, Jesus, and New Testament writer whose words include 411 quotations from Isaiah.

The book is attributed to Isaiah, and scholars debate hotly whether others have contributed. From the book we learn that Isaiah son of Amoz was a Judean, probably living in Jerusalem and his ministry extended from the death of Uzziah and through the reigns of Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. He had easy access to the king (7.3) and leading priests (8.2). He was married to a prophetess and had 2 sons (7.3; 8.3). His ministry extended over 40 years. For at least part of this time he was a contemporary of the prophets Amos, Hosea and Micah.

Isaiah had a very deep sense of mission and of God's call on his life. Chapter 6 tells the story of his vision of God and his holiness, his sense of unworthiness (6.5), his cleansing and empowering for God's plan and

purpose (6.7) and commissioning and commitment. This vision of holiness travels through the book with the challenge for God's people to be like God.

Prophecy

It can be confusing reading Isaiah and trying to work out when his prophecies will be fulfilled. To explain this, the metaphor of a telescope is sometimes used. You can look through a telescope and see a nearer scene, you can open it half way and see a scene slightly further off, or you can extend it fully and see far into the distance. Isaiah had the gift of seeing into the 'then', the 'now' and the 'not yet'. We, who are part of the future, can see that many of the promises God gave through Isaiah have been fulfilled in Jesus Christ. We also gain the hope of knowing that God is active in ALL of history, including our own.

Isaiah speaks with both the near present and far future in mind. His prophecies do not necessarily apply to one event but may apply to a series of present and future events (e.g. in Isaiah 2 2-4 God gave him the gift of looking into the future and seeing what would eventually happen to Jerusalem and in Revelation 21 there is a depiction of the fulfilment of this, giving hope for the future).

Isaiah teaches about God

God as the Holy One, as Saviour, Redeemer, and as Sovereign and Creator of all the world. Isaiah has more to say about the Spirit than any other Old Testament writer. The Spirit enables God's work to be done (61.1).

Isaiah teaches about ourselves

The message of Isaiah *criticises*. Isaiah speaks on God's behalf about all that's wrong with God's people, the nation, and nations. It is so challenging.

The message also *energises* as Isaiah brings not only the reality of their mistakes but the reality of God's way of living that restores people, communities, cities, and countries to places of good relationships, justice, mercy and compassion. We are called to be the change we long to see and to see God at work. The glimmers of God's glory that we see exist to strengthen our resolve to increase those glimmers, striving with God's Spirit to make God's kingdom more present on earth. It is so encouraging.

Exploring Isaiah

During this series you might want to consider setting some time aside prayerfully to read the whole of Isaiah, highlighting bits that really speak to you. Kip found it hard work but very rewarding. Perhaps you could invite others to join you in the challenge and then share how you got on.

A Prayer

God of all comfort,
where we are stuck, release us,
where we have given up hope, inspire us.
Where we focus only on ourselves,
help us to see the needs of others;
transform us by your Spirit to be the people you have called us to be,
spreading your love and proclaiming your presence throughout the world.
We ask this through your Son, our Saviour, Jesus Christ.
Amen.