

Isaiah 11:10-12:6
God's Greatness Displayed
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Walking round the shops in October this year was an odd experience. The weather was so mild many of us were still in T-shirts. And yet the shops had whipped out the fairy lights and were already playing Slade and Wham on the store stereo. For those who are familiar with the books it was a bit like a perverse parody of Narnia – always Christmas but never winter!

But now 2cm of snow has fallen and large parts of Britain seem to be in total chaos – winter has arrived!

In our housegroups this week we've started studying the amazing topic of the incarnation – how the eternal son of God became a human being – Jesus Christ.

Two weeks from today we'll be having our church carol services – I hope you'll be using the flyers to invite friends and family and colleagues to come along.

But it's not that easy sometimes is it? These days, even with something as innocuous as a carol service, I find many people are very suspicious about the whole idea of coming to church.

Maybe there are some people here this morning who feel exactly that – you've been invited here today by a friend but you're slightly uneasy about the whole thing.

Or maybe you're a Christian here this morning and you've experienced just that kind of wariness from folk you know when you've asked them to come to the Pilgrim, or to Christianity Explored or whatever.

And sometimes it only gets harder once they start asking what sort of church we go to.

Is it Church of England they might say? Or Catholic?

Well, no, you reply, it's kind of an independent church. I guess we might call ourselves "evangelical".

Oh dear. The "E" word. E-v-a-n-g-e-l-i-c-a-l spells – religious nutter.

And then they pitch up to church and what are we doing? Reading and explaining some obscure bit of the **Old Testament** (the Old Testament for goodness sake) about bizarre places you've never heard of like Hamath and

Shinar and people going across rivers in sandals (now there's a stereotype if ever there was one).

Well I want to reassure you this morning that the evangelical message, the good news (because that's all evangel means) of Jesus is not weird at all.

And I want to show you that looking at the Old Testament opens up for us a wonderful understanding of what the the Christian message, is all about.

So without further ado let's dive in and look at what Isaiah had to say to his fellow Jews 2,600 years ago...

1 The Christian Message (11:10-16)

Those of you who have been following this series in Isaiah over the course of the term may well be feeling a bit battered and bruised by this stage. Because it hasn't been a terribly pleasant experience.

From the very first verses of the book Isaiah has been proclaiming a message of judgment from God against the very people who claimed to be God's own people.

This terrible judgment has come about not because God is mean or inconsistent but because the people have deliberately, constantly, again and again rejected God and turned their back on his standards. They have worshipped idols and exploited one another.

This is how God described them back on chapter 1:

"sinful nation, a people loaded with guilt, a brood of evildoers, children given to corruption! They have forsaken the Lord, they have spurned the Holy One of Israel and turned their backs on him."

There have been glimmers of hope but overall the message has been one of gloom. We have seen Isaiah commissioned to take a message to God's people Israel that they would reject.

We have heard Isaiah prophecy that the regional superpower of Assyria will invade Israel and all but completely destroy it and scatter the people to the ends of the known world.

Later in the book, when we come back to it next term, we are going to discover the terrible historical reality of those promises of judgment.

And we are going to read about God's rightful anger with the wickedness of the other nations of the world and his plans to bring justice to them and their people.

But here, at the end of the first major section of the book of Isaiah, we find God's promises to his people for the future.

In these verses we discover the evangelical message, the good news of Christianity.

And it's not anything to do with right wing politics or any of the other things most people sadly associate with the idea of being evangelical.

Instead the evangelical message, the Christian message, the message of the Bible...

a) Is about Jesus

If you were here last week you'll know that Isaiah spoke to the people of a shoot that would come up from the stump of Jesse.

To us that sounds pretty obscure. But to any Jew it was perfectly obvious what Isaiah was talking about.

Jesse was the father of the most famous and greatest king ever to rule the nation of Israel – David, God's specially anointed king.

Isaiah is announcing a message that isn't just about another son of David – Israel had had plenty of David's sons as kings and most of them had turned out to be a pretty bad lot.

Isaiah is announcing another David, another anointed king.

A king so great that the nations would rally to him. A king so mighty that wherever he dwelt would be full of glory.

Isaiah's message was about a future king – one who would not arrive for 600 years – Jesus, the one who, when the wise men came from the nations of the East, they knew was King of the Jews.

The Christian message is about the same king. It is about King Jesus.

It's so easy for us to think that the Christian message is about fulfilment, happiness, salvation even. But in the first instance the

Christian message is a message about a person – about Jesus.

It is the message that Jesus is King. Jesus is Lord. If people ever ask you what it is that Christians believe why not start with that?

We get so tongue tied trying to explain what we believe don't we? Why not start by saying to people when they ask that we believe Jesus is Lord and then go from there?

The evangelical message is about Jesus.

b) Is about rescue through Jesus

The Old Testament events of the Exodus, the rescue of the people of Israel from slavery in Egypt, was the very centre of the life of the Jews of Isaiah's day.

It was Christmas and Easter all rolled into one. It was THE great celebration of God's rescue.

Isaiah had promised great and just destruction raining down on God's people from God himself. But God would still rescue his chosen remnant.

There would be a 2nd Exodus – God would rescue his people once more.

There's another echo of the Exodus in v15 of our passage where Isaiah prophesies that God will dry up the river Euphrates, just as he dried up the Red Sea, so that his people can walk across to safety in their regular footwear – no Gore-Tex walking boots required.

The evangelical message is about rescue. About not facing eternal exile from God's presence any more but being with him forever. No longer destined for hell, but for heaven.

But hang on a minute didn't I just say it was not about salvation but about a person?

Well yes. The message is, firstly, about a person. And what that person, the Lord Jesus, does for us, is rescue us.

That's why I think it's so important that both v10 and v11 begin with the same phrase: *In that day*.

You can't separate the coming of the king and the rescue that he comes with. That's why we mustn't talk about God's rescue of us as if it was something separate from Jesus Christ.

I've heard quite a lot of attempts to explain the good news that talk a lot about God and what he's done for us but shy away from saying how God achieves those things through the coming of his Son King Jesus.

The evangelical message is about rescue through King Jesus.

c) Is for everyone

One of the things that I think makes people wary or evangelical Christians and churches like our church is that they get the impression, mainly from the media, that we are very "narrow".

If by that people mean that the Christian message is that some lifestyles and attitudes are not appropriate to people who follow Jesus that I guess we are narrow – greed, pride, unfaithfulness, consumerism, lust and drunkenness, amongst other things, are things against which Jesus and all who truly follow him have always spoken out.

But there is nothing narrow about the Christian message.

Isaiah saw, 600 years before Jesus came, that God's rescue through God's king wouldn't be for a narrow group of Jews living in Jerusalem – it would be for God's chosen people from, v12, the four corners of the earth.

I suspect that at the time even Isaiah may not quite have grasped the implications – rescue not just for Jews but for people of every tribe and people and nation and language. The only truly global religion.

And not only that but this message brings unity...

d) Brings unity

God's people in Isaiah's day were in a right old state. The original nation of Israel, the unified family of 12 tribes that God himself had brought about had fought a series of bloody civil wars and eventually ended up dividing their nation in two.

Their inability to get along, and especially the rivalry for power between the social and political elites of these two nations was a powerful symptom of the godlessness and rebellion of the people.

And, historically, that never changed. 600 years later when Jesus, part of one of the tribes that made up the southern half of the divided kingdom, came he was greeted with

great suspicion by a woman as a well, who was from the northern part.

The hostility between these groups, by then called the Jews and the Samaritans was legendary. So much so that Jesus told what is probably the most famous story in the world about it.

The only thing that dissolved that hostility was when some Jews and some Samaritans both acknowledged that Jesus is their king.

People sometimes suggest that the fact that there are lots of Christian churches – what you might call Christian brands – is evidence that the Christian religion is divisive.

Simply not true.

Profound unity between Christian believers even where we disagree about all sorts of things.

IFES conference – Hutu and Tutsi, Serb and Kosovan.

e) Is victorious

They sometimes say that the old ones are the best – usually of jokes.

And it certainly seems that's what people think about objections to the Christian faith. I'm pretty sure I've never heard an objection to the Christianity that hasn't been around for at least 200 years.

One of the favourite old chestnuts is "what about the crusades (or the Spanish Inquisition – take your pick)?"

In other words the accusation is that Christianity is basically warmongering and violent – forcing conversions at gun point as it were.

And it's an impression that might be reinforced by a passage like v14 of our passage for this morning:

"They will swoop down on the slopes of Philistia to the west; together they will plunder the people to the east. They will lay hands on Edom and Moab, and the Ammonites will be subject to them."

Isn't that exactly the kind of right-wing, proto-fascist language that totally puts people off Christianity?

But actually we need to see beyond the illustration to the reality. Because this prophecy was never fulfilled in some bloody

earthly battle – despite the best efforts of Jewish zealots at regular intervals for hundreds of years after Isaiah wrote these words.

The way in which God’s united people have conquered the world has never been by the sword – though some misguided Christians have tried and many more who were not Christians have abused his name in their cause.

No tyrants have fallen and peoples have been liberated from oppression, idolatry and false religion by the message about the one who we learned a couple of weeks ago is the Prince of Peace.

The history of the last 2,000 years is, in many ways, the history of the spread of the message of Jesus Christ across the globe. There have been fits and starts, declines and set backs but, just as Isaiah promised, the result has been that a message of reconciliation, to God and man, has permeated more and more of the globe.

f) Is about grace

Our daughter Rosie, 18 months next week, has reached that delightful stage in life where she is aware when she has done something clever. Yesterday she built a tower of 4 bricks and then managed to balance a tall, thin cardboard box on the top.

I have to say that I was quite impressed – but then I am prejudiced! “Well done Rosie” I said. And what did she do. She puffed out her chest, threw her arms out and said “good girl” as she paraded round the lounge.

For a toddler who has just learned a new skill that’s quite appropriate behaviour I guess. But sadly many adults are just as quick to take the credit for things that are, ultimately, nothing to do with their skill.

That’s certainly how it was in ancient Israel. After he rescued them from Egypt God granted them astonishing success in taking over the land of Israel from the wicked and perverse child-sacrificing pagans who lived there.

But the Israelites came to think of the victory as theirs. To be proud of their intelligence, strategy and military know-how. When all along it was a matter of God’s grace.

And Isaiah wants to make sure that the people know that when God’s king come, when Jesus rescues and gathers people from

the far corners of the earth in victorious unity it will **not** be because they are great people.

It is the Lord who leads the rescue. It is God who breaks up the impenetrable barrier of the mighty river into streams. It is he who leads the people across.

God’s sending of Jesus and the astonishing rescue that brings is a work of grace from beginning to end.

I wonder as we present the Christian message to people do we, however unwittingly, like to give the impression that we’ve been smart enough to work it out.

That there is something about us that means God really wanted us on his side.

I wonder if you’re not a Christian here this morning and you’ve been given the idea, the impression, during your life that to be Christian means to merit divine help.

Well it doesn’t. The good news of Jesus is a message of grace – of undeserved favour to undeserving people.

The Christian message is about Jesus, is about rescue, is for all people, brings unity and victory and is about God’s grace.

And that is the kind of message we will want to share...

2 Christian Evangelism (12:1-6)

Unless you’ve been asleep through the whole of our meeting so far I think it’s unlikely you’ll have failed to notice that today is our Missions Gift Day.

It was going to be a couple of weeks ago but what with trying to sort out the appointment of our second full-time elder, our Deep Impact seminars, several church family lunches and wot not we decided that we should shunt it back a couple of weeks to today.

And, in a wonderful example of God’s providence, it turns out that Isaiah 12:1-6 is a passage that is particularly appropriate for us to be looking at as we think about giving to world missions.

Because what it tells us is that Christian evangelism, spreading the evangel, the good news, the Christian message...

a) Starts with thankfulness and trust

Some of our ministry apprentices have been having conversations with a lady from the Jehovah's Witnesses recently. That's not because they are thinking of converting – though if you see any copies of "The Watchtower" magazine on the bookstall do let one of the elders know!

Lots of Christians I meet have a sort of grudging admiration for Jehovah's Witnesses. Look at their commitment, they say. Why can't we be more like them in our commitment to evangelism – there they are tramping up and down the streets in good weather and bad sharing what they believe.

Can I say to you this morning that you should never, ever, ever admire Jehovah's Witnesses in their evangelism. Instead you should have profound pity for them.

Because Jehovah's Witnesses are taught that evangelism is a duty. That you do it because it gains you merit with Jehovah and makes you more likely to be one of the 144,000 special and unique people who will actually live in heaven.

Being a JW is a religion of works and its evangelism bears no resemblance at all to true Christian evangelism.

True Christian evangelism starts not with duty but with joy. The response of the Christian to what God does in rescuing him or her is to give thanks, v1. It is to recognise that God has turned his anger aside from us as he poured out his wrath on the Lord Jesus on the cross instead.

Christian evangelism starts not with trying to earn something, but with trust that God has given us something that cannot be taken away – *God IS my salvation, v2, I will trust and not be afraid.*

It's not that God has done something and we have to pay him back. It's not that God has done so much for us and we need to ask what we can do for him.

It is that the Christian who understands their salvation is filled with joy and their life responses reflect that.

In particular we will...

b) Declare what Jesus does joyfully

Our passage ends, as it started, with the glory of God in Christ, the root of Jesse, the Lord, being made known among the nations.

But by the end of the passage we know more about that than we did at the beginning.

Back in 11:10 we know that the nations will enquire of him and that Christ's place of rest will be glorious.

By 12:4 we come to see that the nations will enquire after Jesus because God's people, us, are making his deeds known among the nations.

The good news about Jesus is being joyfully shouted across the globe by God's people.

So can I encourage all of us, this week, to declare joyfully what God has done.

I did consider at this point giving you a list of a few ways you could do that. But I think that would actually undermine the whole point of the passage!

Instead we need simply to seek to be filled with joy as we remember the great rescue that Jesus brings. Then the many ways in which we can declare that to the world will become as plain as day to us.

*Andrew Evans
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