

Isaiah 9:8-21
Human Pride Laid Low
Notes from a sermon preached at Church Liverpool

I was chatting to a friend the other day when he told me a rather good story. Someone from the church he goes to got married about 2 years ago when she was 30 and her husband 25. I've no idea what her name was so let's call her Maggie. They went off on their honeymoon and had a lovely time, doing whatever it is newly married couples do on honeymoon. A few weeks later Maggie was back at her job as a school nurse or some similar role, when a teenage girl came in to see her.

"I think I might be pregnant", the girl said.
"Ok, said Maggie, tell me why you think that."

"Well," the girl replied, "I feel really tired all the time."

And Maggie thought – you know I can really relate to that – I'm feeling exhausted at the moment. Must be sharing a bed for the first time with someone.

"And I also feel really up and down and quite tearful and generally a bit hormonal."

And Maggie thought – I know exactly what you mean.

"And also I've started feeling quite nauseous when I get up in the morning and also sometimes after I've eaten."

And Maggie thought – you know I've been feeling a bit like that too the last week or so.

"So I think I'm probably pregnant"

And Maggie thought – I think I probably am too!

The story doesn't tell whether the girl was pregnant – patient confidentiality and all that! – but Maggie was. So about 10 months after they got married they had their first child!

Given her job Maggie really ought to have recognised the fairly obvious symptoms of pregnancy. But she was so distracted by other things – like being newly married – that she completely ignored what was really patently obvious. And she needed someone else to come in from outside her situation to make her aware of what was really going on.

And that is really almost exactly what is happening in this passage of Isaiah that we're looking at this morning.

So far in the book Isaiah's words have been mainly directed against the tribes that lived in the southern part of the old, united nation of Israel. These people, who now called themselves Judah, were the ones who lived in and around Jerusalem, which is where Isaiah himself was based.

But in our passage for this morning Isaiah turns his attention to the Jewish people living in the northern part of the kingdom – the part that still called itself Israel but which was also referred to as Jacob, Ephraim or Samaria (all names used in this passage).

And in his prophecy Isaiah reveals to them, and to us, both what is going to happen to them as a nation AND the reason for the events that are about to unfold.

The signs of God's judgment are already present – but the people are so wilfully blind that they need Isaiah to come in from outside their situation and draw their attention to the awful things that are about to happen to them.

And in this passage we learn that arrogant "believers" face God's terrible judgment.

Every so often you will, if you're the kind of person who watches or listens to the news at all – and can I say that if you are a Christian you should listen to the news because it's important to know what's going on in God's world – you will hear about the convening or report of a Public Enquiry.

If that's a phrase you've not come across before a Public Enquiry is when the government appoints a judge to find out all the facts relevant to a major incident and report on them. So public enquiries are held into things like the murders committed by Harold Shipman, the abuse suffered by little Victoria Climbié and the Hatfield train crash.

They aren't designed to prevent the thing from happening – it's too late for that. But they are designed to see what lessons can be learned for the future to prevent such things occurring again.

By the time Isaiah spoke these words it's likely that the nation of Israel had already been overrun by the Assyrians. Or that it was on the verge of happening. There is no opportunity now to stop that happening. God provides no escape clause to the people of

Israel. It's not that if they repent now it won't happen. God's judgment is fixed and the storm clouds are gathering if they have not already burst.

Isaiah's words are not really for Israel. They are for the nation of Judah – to show them what lessons can be learned and to plead with them to change their behaviour to stop such terrible events happening to them.

And these words are also for us. They are designed to reveal to us the warning signs of an apostate church – that is a group of people who claim to belong to Christ but are actually turning away from him – and to make clear to us what God's judgment looks like on people who will not be obedient to his word. We are going to see four key warning signs of a church rejecting God's kingship in the four verses of this poem – each of which ends with the chilling refrain "*yet for all this, his anger is not turned away, his hand is still upraised.*"

But before we get to those things let's just remind ourselves by looking through the whole section just what an unimaginably hideous thing it is to fall under God's judgment.

Just as the Bible's images of the wonder of God's rescue cannot do justice to the amazing experience it is to be a Christian and, especially, to live with God in glory forever, so the Bible's images cannot do justice to the sickening experience it is to face God's judgment and, especially, to be separated from God and all goodness in a conscious eternity in hell.

But Isaiah does his best here – piling up thought after thought to remind his audience why they must turn back to God – they must flee his judgment by running into his arms.

At the time of the Exodus, the great rescue of the Old Testament that stood as a kind of model to the Israelites of the wonder of God's salvation, God's upraised arm was a symbol of power in defence of his people – protecting them from persecution by the Egyptians and others. But now, v12, God's still upraised hand is raised in judgment against them.

Throughout the Old Testament the God of the Bible, in utter contrast to the gods of the nations, is not the god of the rich and powerful and political and influential. He is the God who sides with the downtrodden, the migrant, the widow and the orphan. He is the God who rejoices in the men who will fight in his battles against the godlessness of the surrounding nations. But amongst his people

Israel everyone has become so wicked that, v17, "*the Lord does not rejoice over their young men, and has no compassion on their fatherless and widows.*"

And there will be no escape from this terrible judgment. Look at 10:3-4. When God comes to bring his justice nothing in this life will be of any use. No friends of power and influence will be able to help you then. Calling up a mate who is a judge, or a Chief Constable, or a top surgeon or a wealthy parent will be utterly pointless. To whom will you flee for help? To no-one. And it won't matter how much money you have. Stocks and shares? Pension fund? Own your own home? Where will you leave your wealth? Nowhere. There will be nothing left to do but, v4, to crouch among the prisoners or fall among the slain.

There are almost certainly some people here this morning who are living a life that is practical atheism.

It's not that you don't believe in God – it's just that he's not making any real difference to your life.

And you are kidding yourself that it'll be OK. Well Isaiah says it won't. Or, as the New Testament puts it, *it is a terrible thing to fall into the hands of the living God.*

Now the good news is, this morning, that I do not think we are an apostate church. My impression is that the vast majority of people here this morning are seeking to live a life that pleases God and brings glory to his name in your work, leisure and relationships. And that is something to be immensely thankful for isn't it? We should rejoice this morning that we are not like Israel. That as a church we are committed to believing and living the Bible's gospel every day. Saying that is not pride. Because I want us to acknowledge that every good thing in our individual and collective lives this morning is a miracle of God's grace, something we don't deserve. Something to praise him for; not to congratulate ourselves for.

But just because things are like that at the moment doesn't mean that they will always be like that. We need to take heed of Isaiah's warning and be on the lookout for the signs in our lives that might indicate we are on our way to rejecting God. These are things to look for; in your own life, in our church life, in the lives of other Christians you care about and, if you ever move to another church, in that church family. Four warning signs of apostasy (that is turning away from following God) in the church:

i) Thinking we can save the Church (9:8-12)

The people of Israel had faced some significant problems. It's quite likely that the reference to the bricks falling in v10 is talking about an earthquake that happened around this time.

We can't be sure but it's clear that they were convinced that whatever bad stuff had happened amongst God's people they could solve it. And not only could they solve it – they could actually make it better than it was before. The bricks had fallen – but the houses they would replace them with would be made from stone. They might have had to chop a few fig trees down but elegant cedars would be replanted in their place.

But God would not put up with their pride, v9 there, or arrogance of heart.

The church in the UK is in a desperate state. Declining numbers in all mainline denominations. Even independent evangelical churches like ours are simply declining less fast than more liberal churches. Difficulties in recruiting people for ministry. Paltry giving – especially to missions. Terrible prayerlessness.

And in such circumstances it can be easy to walk in to a church like this one which is committed to developing gospel ministers, to prayer, to missions, to giving and is growing in numbers and imagine that this is the answer. Can I say to you that if you think Christ Church is the answer, to anything, you are in danger of deserting Jesus.

The gospel, the message of Jesus, is always the only answer. Yes the gospel does create the church. Yes gospel churches should see gospel fruit. But it is always the gospel, not the church, that we must have confidence in.

Maybe we need to cultivate deliberately saying not "our church is great" but "the gospel our church believes is great."

If we think our skills, talents, theories and ideas can rescue the church we are heading towards judgment.

ii) Self-serving leadership (9:13-17)

It is often said that people get the kind of leaders they deserve. I have no idea what that says about the people or Britain. Nor much idea what that says about the members of our church!

But it was certainly true in Isaiah's day.

The leaders who guided the people have been, v16, leading them astray. The prophets in particular were, v15, telling lies. They were uttering untruths about God and misleading the people into thinking they were safe from God's judgment when they weren't.

But the people were responsible too. They, v16, were willing to be guided by their leaders. They were not returning to what the Bible said to challenge their leaders – they were meekly following them into sin.

These leaders were not leaders at all. Isaiah points this out with biting irony: the prophets who should have been guiding the people in understanding God's word are nothing more, v15, than a tail – wagging in time with whatever tune society around them was playing.

This lunchtime the Elders will be commending to the members of the church that we should elect Steve Palframan as an Elder. One of the reasons I will be commending Steve to them is that I believe he is the kind of man who will tell the church things from the scriptures that we do not wish to hear.

I was having a conversation with a church member the other day and we were discussing how church leadership is inherently difficult – because church leaders are charged with the job of applying God's word to all the parts of our lives where we do not want to be obedient to God.

I hope you feel that is what we do as Elders at Christ Church. If you ever feel we are simply making you feel comfortable you should ask us about that. Because wanting everybody to be comfortable with us all the time is a sure sign of the kind of self-serving leadership God judged in Isaiah's day – along with the people who followed.

iii) Commitment to self-fulfilment (9:18-21)

Cosmopolitan magazine is a terrible curse. I'm not singling them out especially – it's no worse than GQ or Company or Esquire or More or FHM or any one of 100 others.

But what those magazines sell to us is Isaiah 9:20 – *On the right they will devour but still be hungry; on the left they will eat but not be satisfied. Each will feed on the flesh of his own arm* (the NIV footnote is correct here).

This isn't the hunger of starvation that Isaiah is talking about. It is the hunger of fulfilment, of acquisitiveness, of always wanting more. That's not just more money, or more DVDs, or more clothes; though our insatiable appetite for those things does bring ruin and misery on others around the world.

The sign of an apostate church is also simply when we start to think that the main role for other people in my life is to fulfil my needs.

It's the kind of thinking that has boys saying "if she really loved me she'd do that with me." And girls saying "my expectation of my lover is that he will make me emotionally satisfied as a person."

It's the kind of thinking that says that not liking my job very much is a good reason to go off travelling.

It's the kind of thinking that my principal expectation about church is that when I come people will make friends with me not that I will really, really go out of my way to make friends with them.

It's a life that is always destined to fail – because only God can fulfil what we desire, even if we don't realise that, and because we can consume the whole earth and not be satisfied.

iv) An unjust mentality (10:1-4)

The final sign of the church's turning away from God is the way in which an exalted clique make rules and carries out policies that protect the wealthy and powerful at the expense of the poor.

And if you think that can't happen in the church; think again. Recent revelations make clear that in numerous denominations, and especially in the Roman Catholic church, senior people have been making policies for years that have covered up child abuse by church officials and dignitaries at the expense of the victims. Is that not exactly the kind of thing Isaiah is talking about here?

That is one of the clear signs that a church has turned away from God.

And don't think it can't happen here at Christ Church. It is all too easy, in myriad different circumstances, for those who lead or are key people in the church to end up setting up the way everything is done for their own convenience and prestige and not for the gospel.

Those were the signs of apostasy in ancient Israel. Those signs may well be present today where a church is turning from Christ. Watch out for them. Because God's judgment is terrible.

But it does not have to be that way. There is no need for us, as a church, or as individuals, ever to get to that state. And God's intention for his people is that we should heed the warnings of the Bible so that this never happens to us.

Essentially the problem of Israel was a problem of pride and haughtiness. They did not recognise that they needed God's mercy and so every part of their individuals, corporate and national life became twisted and wicked.

God's intention is that we escape his judgment by throwing ourselves on the mercy of his promised king – the one who we saw last week is Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.

And the message of Isaiah 9 is that we need to recognise the symptoms of apostasy.

And where we see any of these signs of turning from God in our lives we need to come back once more and trust in Jesus Christ afresh.

*Andrew Evans
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