

Isaiah 2:1-5: God's Dream
Notes from a sermon preached at Christ Church Liverpool

Well a new university year has started. I can always tell when that's about to happen. Some people think the best way to tell that it's a new academic year is to go to Tesco's and see if the shelves have been stripped bare of £5.74 toasters and kettles. Others think it more effective to drive past the Guild of Students and check if there is a queue of several thousand people in school uniform trying to get into the "discotheque". Why is it, by the way, that people who have spend most of the last 13 years trying to escape school uniform celebrate their new found freedom by wearing it again?

But I think there is another indicator of the new academic year which is just as reliable and doesn't require spying in Asda or late night drives past Liverpool Students Union. What is this great secret you may ask?

Well it's simple. The start of a new academic year is inevitably signalled by the appearance in "Liverpool Student" newspaper of an article slagging off Christians. And when I opened my copy of that august publication this week what do I find: "Just how many Gods are there?" by the paper's new Comment Editor, Alex Davids.

A thoughtful enquiry into the difficulties of philosophical pluralism perhaps? An analysis of the problems of tolerance in a multicultural university?

Of course not. Just the usual freshers' week prejudice and ignorance. Presumably being the "comment editor" of Liverpool Student doesn't require you to demonstrate any understanding of the subject you're writing on.

The article tells us that that God's command not to kill people is "woeful" and that Christianity can be confidently dismissed because pictures people have drawn of Adam and Eve show them being white whereas we all know there are lots of people of different races in the world.

Well if that's the evidence stacked up against Christianity I think we'd better just close the church down right now and go home!

But before we get too carried away in poking fun at Liverpool Student (after all what else do you really expect from a student newspaper) we need to recognise that Alex Davids is basically just stating a belief that is

fundamentally shared by millions and millions of people in the UK.

What he is saying is that all religions, and particularly Christianity, are nothing more than stories. Myths, dreams and fabrications.

Or, as Davids puts it: "*basically we have like billions of people basing their entire lives on the belief of stories that have been passed on through the generations.*"

You can't trust Christianity, people say. It's just legend. A set of stories that people have constructed to make themselves feel better about their lives and help them cope with life's struggle. It's nothing more than a crutch for the spiritually weak.

50 years ago, most people would have said that science – fact, experiment and research – is what we should be trusting instead. And many still believe that science is a much more reliable source of truth than Christianity.

Today, I guess, most people – maybe many here this morning – put more trust than anything else in the world in your own feelings and emotions. It is only what resonates with you in your inner being that can be considered truly authentic. Hence the explosion of interest in witchcraft, crystals, meditation, and all sorts of eastern religious practices we see all around us.

Many other people, happy to claim the name Christian approach the Bible as if much of it is myth and story and as if lots of it needs to be stripped away before we can get at the authentic spiritual bits. They tell us we can live without all the parts people today find difficult – the creation, the miracles, Jesus' resurrection, anything to do with sexuality, the sanctity of life, judgment or hell.

And many of us who call ourselves Bible believing Christians, the kind of people I guess are most likely to be at Christ Church this morning, well I think we often have real difficulty believing the things we say we believe. Oh sure we'll sign the church Statement of Faith of the CU Doctrinal Basis and become a member. We'll get appropriately irritated by people like Alex Davids and ask how they can write such nonsense. But hidden away inside us are real and serious doubts that the promises of the Christian faith are actually true.

We do struggle to believe that Jesus died and rose bodily from the dead. We do find it hard to recognise that Jesus will return in person and judge the living and the dead. We do sometimes fail to hold on to the truth that all those who have lived and died trusting in Jesus' death on the cross in their place will live with him and his people forever.

And it was just the same 2,700 years ago in Isaiah's day. When Isaiah addressed his prophecy to the nation of Judah and, v1, especially the inhabitants of the city of Jerusalem, there were thousands of people who would happily have signed any doctrinal statement he had produced. People who were regular attenders at public worship and who prayed and sang with the best of them.

It's actually possible that v2-4 of our passage this morning weren't actually written by Isaiah but were the words of a popular hymn doing the rounds in Jerusalem at the time. If that is the case Isaiah wants to point out to the people that they weren't really believing what they were signing.

And their lack of trust in the God of the Bible was revealed not so much by their words but, as it so often is with us, by what they did. This was a people that, despite sincere appearances, was actually putting its trust in all sorts of things other than God.

- Personally they were materialists – 2:7 – filling their luxury homes with all the gadgets and gizmos of the day.
- Militarily they were self-confident – 2:7 – their government investing heavily in the ancient equivalent of nuclear deterrence, fighter jets and aircraft carriers.
- Religiously they were syncretists – 2:8 – happily coexisting with other religions and trying to make the god of the Bible inoffensive to as many people as possible.
- Economically they were capitalists – 3:15 – happy to allow market forces to rule even if that meant grinding poverty for most.
- Socially they were ambitious – 3:16-23. Their wealth was invested in designer labels, spas, jewellery and generally seeking to get on in life by projecting the most positive image they possibly could.

I don't imagine that any of them were all of those things. I'm sure there were some lovely, generous idol worshippers and some designer label worshippers who hated Judah's military expansionism.

But it only needed one of those things for each person to show that their confidence was

not in the God of the Bible or his promises but in themselves and their abilities.

And they needed to get over that. As Isaiah himself puts it at the end of this chapter (v22): "*Stop trusting in man, who has but a breath in his nostrils. Of what account is he?*"

So in these verses Isaiah presents to us God's dream, God's plan for his world and teaches some fundamental lessons we need to remember in a world that constantly tempts us not to trust God.

1 Only Christianity lasts (v2-3a)

Those of you who read any decent number of Christian books will have noticed that Christian publishers (and, I have noticed Islamic, Buddhist and other makers of religious books) have a particular penchant for covers featuring pictures of mountains.

You may be interested to know that this passion for mountains is by no means a new thing. In Isaiah's day, and indeed for thousands of years before that, people with all sorts of religious beliefs in the ancient near east associated mountains with the centre of their religion.

The Jews were no exception. God had ordered king Solomon, some 300 years before Isaiah was around, to build a relatively small, but immensely impressive and ornate temple on Mount Zion – the hill at the centre of the city of Jerusalem.

One way of thinking about religion in the ancient near-east was to view it as a kind of battle for the title "king of the mountains". And, according to Isaiah, that is a battle that the Lord, the God of the Bible will surely win.

In the last days the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills; and all nations shall stream to it.

Physically Mount Zion was, and is, nothing like as high as some of the other famous mountains with religious associations in that region. Even in the Jewish religion, Mount Sinai, where God gave his laws to Moses, is some three times higher than Mount Zion.

But, Isaiah says, supernaturally, Mount Zion, the location of God's temple, will be established, it will be made, the chief among the mountains. People from many nations will realise the pointlessness and futility of their idols and come, instead, to the house of the living God in Jerusalem.

In our own day many political commentators, strategists, and even many Christians, seem deeply troubled by the rise of Islam. Personally I am more immediately worried about the rise in the kind of destructive hedonism we see all around us, typified by the guy sitting across the corridor from me on the train on my way home on Friday who was young enough to be travelling on a child's ticket but drank about six cans of Stella between Birmingham and Crewe. What a tragedy.

But whatever it is that troubles us – whether by keeping us awake at night or by tempting us to say “stuff it” and just join in – we need to remember that it won't last. One day Western materialism, Islam, Buddhism, Hinduism and all the other man made religious systems of the world will be shown up for the idolatrous lies that they are and *“the mountain of the Lord's temple will be established as chief among the mountains... and all nations will stream to it.”*

Of course that process has already begun. Because the one who said that he was God's temple – that he was the place we must go to meet with God and to have our sins forgiven – has come. And people of many nations have already streamed to Jesus and continue to do so. It is no coincidence that, as far as anybody can tell, there are about 1 billion more Christians in the world today than followers of any other set of beliefs. And that is just a foretaste of what is to come when, on the day Jesus returns, millions upon millions will greet him with joy and gladness as their king. And even those who hate and curse him will be forced to bow their knees and acknowledge his kingship before he pronounces his just judgment on them.

Only Christianity lasts.

2 Only the Bible transforms (v3b)

After church last Sunday night Maurice and I went down to Sefton Park to watch the light display that was being put on there. It was very good – lots of images of the history of the city projected onto a wall of water created by a kind of very powerful but fine fountain followed by music and fireworks. Now we were there for the last of 9 showings over 3 nights but, it must be said, the turnout was pretty small – no more than a couple of hundred people I would guess. Even the very impressive fireworks on the waterfront for Guy Fawkes night (which, if you're new to Liverpool of haven't been to before you really should go to) only get a few thousand people.

So you would imagine, wouldn't you, that God is going to have to do something pretty amazing and spectacular to bring people from many nations streaming to his temple.

So what is it? Particularly impressive fireworks? A completely new style of music?

Well, astonishingly, the thing that brings the nations clamouring to the God of Israel is... his law. His word. It is what God has said that will transform the world: *For out of Zion shall go the law, and the word of the law from Jerusalem.*

God's word goes out – and worshippers come back. It is as only as God's word is proclaimed to the nations that they will come streaming to the temple.

For us, God's word has been wonderfully preserved, kept for us and translated into this handy to carry around book that we call the Bible. We can buy it cheaply and even get it completely free over the internet. But we mustn't think that because it is easy to find the Bible is therefore just common. The coronation service of the British monarch tells us, rightly, that the gift of the Bible is the most precious thing that there is to be had in the whole world.

If you're relatively new to Christ Church I hope that you will quickly discover that we are a Bible church, that we are Bible people. And the reason we seek to be Bible people is because we believe that, uniquely, unlike any other book ever written, even Harry Potter, the words of the Bible come with the authority and power of God himself through his Holy Spirit. It is a work of the Spirit of God that when God's word, the Bible, goes out to the nations, worshippers return.

And the Holy Spirit only does that work when the Bible word. God's word, is sent out. It is God's word that transforms lives – bringing worship where previously there was rebellion.

3 Only God brings peace (v4)

Alexandrina Victoria Saxe-Coburg, better known to us as Queen Victoria, reigned from 1836 to 1901, making her the longest serving British monarch ever. During those 65 years the British Empire grew, largely peacefully, to cover much of the globe, and it was one of the most peaceful periods of British history for 1,000 years. But as she lay dying her final words were these: *“Oh, that peace may come.”*

The next 99 years say 185 million people killed in wars and conflicts of one sort or another – the bloodiest century in the history of the world.

World peace is one of those things that pretty much everybody thinks is a good idea. At least as far as I know I've never met anyone who was opposed to world peace. But despite that fact. In spite of the best efforts of many of the world's brightest philosophers, diplomats, religious leaders and politicians we are probably no closer to world peace than we ever have been.

Isaiah 2:4 has been a dream for many people over the centuries. It is one of the most quoted verses in the Bible – beating swords into ploughshares and spears into pruning hooks. But it seems to remain just a dream. Why should that be?

The answer, of course, is simple. True peace will only come, in the life of an individual as much as a nation, when God is in charge. When God comes in judgment, when he decides disputes; that is when the nations will get rid of the means of war (the swords), the desire for war (they will not take up swords against other nations) and the ability to fight war (they will not train for war any more).

And it is only when the nations want something else instead that they will stop fighting one another. It is only when the peoples of many countries unite in saying "come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord" that they will realise that listening to God's word is more important than killing each other. In other words dreams of world peace are entirely empty if God is left out of the picture. Only God brings peace.

If you're not a Christian here this morning I hope that looking at Isaiah's words has helped you to see that the future belongs to God. The real God. The God of the Bible. The God who is there. I hope it will at least make you consider finding out more about this God – the God who sent his son Jesus Christ to die on a cross so that we might know him forever.

I hope that if you are already a Christian here this morning Isaiah's words have reminded and encouraged you that, whatever the world may tell you, Christianity is not myth and legend. In fact God's words are the most real things in the entire universe.

The end of Alex Davids article in Liverpool Student goes like this:

"Personally I think it's OK not to know life's elusive questions. Nor are we supposed to know so I wish people would put a proverbial sock in it and get on with their lives."

Presumably Alex Davids is the one person who is allowed to break his own rule and write hundreds of words about life's elusive questions and share them with the rest of us!

But it's interesting to see what the Bible has to say about this. Romans 3:19. On the day when Jesus returns and bring in the era of peace that Isaiah foresaw it will be those who reject God, those who dismiss his word who will have nothing to say.

But does that make any difference to us today? How will being more confident that what God says really is true, that God's word is the most real thing in the universe make a difference to us tomorrow morning? Well the answer, Isaiah says, is that we should be who we are.

4 So, Christian, be who you are (v5)

The problem with the people of Isaiah's day was that although they said they were believers in the living God their behaviour showed that they were putting their trust in men.

But Isaiah says that if God's people really believed that many nations will stream to God's perfect temple. If we really believe that Jesus' words are the most real thing in the world... Well then we won't hedge our bets like that. We won't try and look like we're trusting God but actually be trusting men.

The nations will say "let us go up to the mountain of the Lord." If we believe that then God's people should say, v5, "let us walk in the light of the Lord."

I wonder if some of the things that people who professed to be believers in Isaiah's day are actually true of us this morning.

I wonder if we are materialists filling our luxury homes, or even our slightly cramped student study-bedrooms with all the gadgets and gizmos of the day.

I wonder if we place our confidence in living in a rich western nations to protect ourselves from the disasters and horrors of the world?

I wonder if we try to make the god of the Bible inoffensive to as many people as possible – perhaps very often just by not telling people what we believe.

I wonder if we are socially ambitious – determined to make friends only with the coolest people in Freshers' week, to win the favourable attention of our hospital consultant, to project the most positive image of ourselves we possibly can, no matter what compromises we have to make to do so.

If any of those things are true of us what it shows is that we do not believe in God's dream. That we do not believe that what God says he will do through Jesus Christ is real. That we are not truly convinced that the future belongs to God and his people.

So perhaps this morning is the right time for us to reassess what we really believe about the future. To say sorry to God that we have not taken his promises seriously enough. Maybe, like me, you look back on just this last week and recognise that you have thought, said and done things that are not walking in the light of the Lord. Things that betray the fact that my confidence in God's promises is not what it should be.

Why don't we take a few minutes now to think about those things, to say sorry to God that we do not trust him as we should and to ask for his help to walk in the light of what he has promised he will do?

Andrew Evans
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