

Sermon: 15 August 2021, Patronal Festival: St Mary Isa 7:10-15; Gal 4:4-7; Lk 1:46-55

May the words of my mouth, and the meditation of all our hearts, be now and always acceptable unto You O Lord, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

It's sometimes difficult to identify with stories from the OT, in part because it's not our history and perhaps in part because of all the bloodshed and battle. Many of us find images of retribution in particular, difficult to reconcile with the message of forgiveness and hope, and the image of a loving God in the NT.

But there's often another reason we find the OT difficult to understand... *we don't read it* ... and that can make it really difficult to relate to the ANE context and explain why we have trouble perceiving the mindset of the various characters. Today's story from Isaiah is a classic case. It's a reading we often hear at Christmas ... when everybody's in the mood for a miracle. But it's about a king who becomes fearful to the point of inactivity ... Ahaz rejects Isaiah's prophecy from God that he will prevail against strong opposition, despite being told that if he doesn't trust God and get on with it, God will change His mind, withdraw His promise and make sure he doesn't win.

There's a common theme in all the readings today; that God offers to break in and restore, reveal and redeem the mess we have made of his creation ... but He wants us to participate in that process. Ahaz fails to take the opportunity and suffers the consequences, Mary accepts the challenge happily; she is obedient despite the likely compromised prospects for her own immediate future, and Luke tells us how Isaiah's prophecy is fulfilled in Christ.

Isaiah promises hope in the midst of the king's distress. He foretells that the Lord will give the king a sign ... *a young woman will bear a son and will call him Immanuel (God with us) ... by the time he is weaned and before he knows how to choose between*

good and evil, the child shall eat the finest foods back in the land of milk and honey.

In other words, within the next year or two, the enemy forces of the combined northern tribes will have been totally defeated and the people will have returned home and enjoy the prosperity for which the Promised Land was known under David and Solomon ... if he fails to trust and have faith however, he will pay a heavy price. This sense of retribution, of cause and consequence is often difficult for us to take in; it's not fair!

In the NT reading today Paul makes it clear that we Gentiles are heirs of the same promise as the Jews ... albeit on a different foundation. Jews are heirs *by inheritance*, through the Law, and through God's loyalty to Abraham and Moses. We however, are heirs *by adoption*. God has *chosen us* to be His and we have accepted His invitation. Jesus, *born of a woman, born under Law* has revealed that compliance with the Law is no longer relevant ... we are redeemed by God's grace alone and take our place alongside the children of Abraham *as of right*. Paul makes the case that this is the only way that God's promise to Abraham can be fulfilled ... that he will be the father of many nations ... and his children shall be more numerous than the grains of sand on the beach. But in order to claim this inheritance, we must transform our lives *from what we were on our own* into what God wants us to be *in Christ*. Just like Ahaz and Mary, we must act to choose the right.

The Magnificat, Mary's song is replete with OT references that point to Jesus being the Messiah. We note also that Mary speaks of blessings that *have already come to pass* ... she celebrates things that God has already done ... and Jesus hasn't even been born

yet! She expresses her gratitude that she has been given a chance to serve. She sings of justice, a reversal of the fortunes of both rich and poor, of reform and renewal, and of feeding the hungry. There is a sense in which Mary recognises that in accepting this challenge, her salvation and that of all God's chosen people is both *realised now* and is still *yet to come*.

God brings both grace and judgment ... He takes the initiative but invites us to participate, just as He did for Mary and for Ahaz. How will we respond in our time and place?

This church building has stood for just over a hundred years. It is beautifully appointed and stands in part, as a memorial to people who have gone before us. It is named for St Mary, the Mother of God, the ultimate example of a willing and obedient servant of our Lord. What message can we take from that? What has changed for the people of God since Mary's time?

Well, in many ways not much has changed at all: we are still vulnerable to the fragility and brokenness of our world, we are still distracted at times from listening to God because of our fears and suppositions, we are still vulnerable to disease and economic and political compromise, and we are still living into a future that has *not yet* come to be ... we still have time to obey, just like Mary and her baby all those years ago ... just like Ahaz ... God is with us.

In the last few weeks, we have seen new information emerge about climate change, and plans for dealing with the Corona Virus in the future have been updated. The key voices and messages in our world aren't always from God or His prophets but He is still our God, and we are His people. God will have His way; He, through us will restore His creation; overcome the worst we can come up with, but we need to follow Him and obey.

Keep listening and praying for guidance. Keep sharing your fears and your hopes with others ... and keep listening for God's still small voice among the many others that clamour for our attention. Elijah learned to be obedient and found God in the silence ... when did we last look there?

Amen.