

THE WORD OF OUR GOD STANDS FOR EVER

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BACKGROUND TO THE READING

ISAIAH 40 : 1 – 11

The first 39 chapters of Isaiah refer to a time when Assyria was the enemy of the people of God. Assyrian kings rose up against the Israelites. Isaiah lived through this period and he warned the people about the consequences of their sinful lives.

In chapters 40 to 66 the enemy of the people are the Babylonians. The Israelites are living in captivity in Babylon. This took place 200 years after Isaiah lived and so his words are prophetic, giving the people God's views of the future.

From chapter 40 onwards, God promises to comfort his people and bring them relief from their hardships. The word comfort appears 13 times. Isaiah is to speak tenderly to the people and encourage them. But then in verse 2 it appears that God is threatening a double punishment for sins – Israel's sin has been paid for, she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

Double in the original language and in English has two meanings. It can mean "twice as much" but it can also mean "fold in two" as in folding a piece of paper in two or doubling it over. It is the second meaning that applies here.

There was an ancient custom regarding debt. If poor people were unable to pay a debt, they might become slaves as there were no government funds to help them out. There was one thing the poor person could do. He could fix the final demand in a public place and hope that a rich person would come along and fold over or double over the piece of paper. The rich person would then sign his name on the paper and pay the poor man's debt and this was visible to everyone.

And so God is doubling to redeem his people. He forgives them because of his love and kindness towards them. They could not earn their freedom by

working, only God could rescue them, just as the rich man could rescue the poor man.

These verses speak about God rescuing his people from Babylon and restoring them to Judah. But they also speak about the coming of Jesus Christ. The voice calling in the desert to prepare the way for the Lord is understood in the New Testament to refer to John the Baptist. When important visitors were expected, the road would be specially prepared and made ready.

The Messiah who comes will raise up the lowly and bring down the proud and arrogant.

God assures the people that he is powerful enough to save them – the power of the Assyrians and the Babylonians will fade but God's power will endure forever.

We are to proclaim the good news from the mountain tops and lift up our voices with confidence saying "Here is your God!" The phrase "Do not be afraid" appears 9 times in later chapters of Isaiah, each time encouraging the people to do some task and not to worry because God's power will help them.

In these verses God is described as having immense power, everlasting power but also great tenderness, looking after his people like a shepherd tends his sheep, carrying the young lambs close to his heart and gently leading their mothers. There is a clear reference to Jesus who was to be the great shepherd of the sheep, laying down his life for his flock.

There is also a challenge for us in these verses, a challenge to be like Jesus and to help to carry the weak and the vulnerable close to our hearts.

AMEN

Sermon

Isaiah 40 : 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of our god stands for ever

Withered grass and fallen flowers are used by Isaiah to illustrate the temporary nature of things on earth. It struck me when thinking about this that withered

grass is not such a relevant image for us here in Scotland because it rains every month of the year and our grass never really withers! If you were still running your lawnmower over the grass in November you will know what I mean. But in hot, arid countries grass certainly withers if there is no rainfall and no irrigation.

All flowers, however beautiful and perfect – whether they are dandelions or the most expensive roses or orchids – will fade and fall.

Empires have risen and fallen, cultures have expanded and faded – the Mongolian Empire, the Ottoman Empire, the Greeks, the Romans, the French under Napoleon, the Germans under Hitler and of course the British Empire which spread to almost every continent and to the other side of the world.

The words of great leaders carried power and influence – for a very short time. Only the word of our God stands for ever. The word of God as contained in scripture has endured for thousands of years and is still as relevant today as it was centuries ago.

Ghandi was not a Christian but he famously said that if he could have only one document written in the history of the world it would be Jesus' Sermon on the Mount because these words speak the greatest truth about the nature of human beings and how they should live their lives in relation to one another and in relation to God.

Interestingly, Jesus said during that sermon **“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth where moth and rust destroy and where thieves break in and steal. But store up for yourselves treasures in heaven where moth and rust do not destroy and where thieves do not break in and steal. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also.” (Matthew 6:19-21)**

The Jewish people listening to Isaiah knew about the eternal nature of their God, of Yahweh, God who is the same yesterday, today and for ever. As the psalmist repeated 26 times (psalm 136), “His love endures for ever.” The sacred scrolls were taken down from their stand and unrolled to be read whenever the people gathered to worship. God's word was at the centre of that worship.

But for Christians today, I believe that verse 8 has a whole new meaning and significance. The grass withers and the flowers fall but the word of our God stands for ever. We would write the “word” with a capital W because the Word of God is Jesus Christ.

In thinking about this verse during the week, I was focusing on the word of God as the bible which does endure for ever. But I was driving in my car on Thursday when God spoke out of the blue into my heart – he said, “My Word is my Son Jesus Christ and he lives for ever and because of him you will live for ever too.” When we dwell on these words we realise what an awesome promise this is.

The first chapter of John’s gospel contains some of the most powerful words in the New Testament – **“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning.....The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth.”**

These words are often read on Christmas Eve at Watchnight services and some congregations will stand for the reading, such is the respect and wonder of Emmanuel, God with us.

Towards the end of his life on earth, when the disciple Philip asked Jesus to show him God the Father, Jesus said **“Anyone who has seen me has seen the Father.....I am in the Father and the Father is in me.”** (John 14 : 9 & 10)

In this season of Advent we think about Emmanuel, God with us. Jesus gave up the glory of heaven for the suffering of earth. As Matt Redman sang **“You laid aside your majesty, gave up everything for me, suffered at the hands of those you had created.”**

I sometimes watch The Secret Millionaire in which a very wealthy, successful person gives up his or her lifestyle for a week, goes to live undercover in a poor area and seeks out worthy causes and individuals who then receive a gift of money at the end of the week. In scruffy clothes and with a cover story, people they meet do not recognise them as wealthy and successful. Some of these millionaires struggle to live without the things and people they take for

granted in their regular lives. Some go on a very emotional journey as they face personal issues in their lives which they have not dealt with. But at the end of the week they go home and resume their normal lives.

Jesus was a kind of secret millionaire who came to earth with all the treasures of heaven.

Unlike the programme, Jesus did not return home at the end of a week.

Unlike the programme, the treasures he offered were not for just a few chosen people but for all people.

Unlike the programme, in which the millionaire reveals himself and people hug him and are grateful for his gift, Jesus revealed himself in many direct and indirect ways but still the people did not accept him or the gifts he brought and rejected him.

You see, Jesus was an unlikely Messiah, an unlikely King of the Jews, not exactly what the Jews were waiting for, as invisible to many as the millionaire in his scruffy clothes living in a run down flat.

Jesus was born to an unmarried teenage mother from a humble background

He was born in a stable and not in a palace

He was placed in a manger, not in a crib

He was raised by a carpenter in a backwater town called Nazareth. The Pharisees asked "Can anything good come out of Nazareth?"

He was a travelling preacher with no special training

He gathered around him uneducated and rough followers

He associated with sinners, prostitutes, the unclean and despised

He had no friends in high places and in fact those in high places were usually his enemies

He had no army, he rode on a donkey rather than a charger

He had no weapons or power base and turned the other cheek when attacked

He never led or pastored a huge successful church

He never ran a stewardship campaign to raise funds

He never travelled far from the land where he was born

He never wrote anything down, he was not recorded on video or DVD

He did not feature on Youtube or Twitter

He never married or had children

He died the shameful death of a convicted criminal

He was buried in a borrowed tomb

His body disappeared

But the Word of God endures for ever! Jesus Christ has been the most influential and enduring person who ever lived in the history of the world.

Why was Christ born to a young girl at Christmas time? What was the purpose of Christ's life on earth?

John 3 : 16 & 17 gives us a clue – **“For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life. For God did not send his Son into the world to condemn the world but to save the world through him”**

These two verses are the foundation of the Christian faith – God loves the world, every man, woman and child, Jesus Christ is the Son of God, we are saved from our sins by the life and death of Jesus and through faith we have eternal life.

Don't you feel, deep within, that there is more to existence than this life on earth? Our bodies grow old and weak but the spirit within remains strong. I used to be dubious when I was young and someone in their eighties would say that she felt exactly the same inside as she had felt in her youth. But I am beginning to understand that. The “me” inside would still like to do the things I did in my younger days but the body says maybe not! We might need to accept playing our sport in the veteran category. Eventually we will walk upstairs and not run, we will let the bus we can see in the distance go and wait

for the next one, no more sprinting along Princes Street. I used to be out and about all day, every day with a baby, a two year old, a four year and a six year old – now after one day with Anna I am only too happy to hand her back and fall asleep in front of the television!

Like the grass and the flowers, our bodies wither and fall but our lives have already been claimed by Jesus and will go on. Jesus has promised this. And we can hold onto this promise when loved ones are frail and weak and weary and ready to go to the Lord. We can release them in trust and faith.

John 11 : 25 & 26 – Jesus said to Martha **“I am the resurrection and the life. He who believes in me will live, even though he dies and whoever lives and believes in me will never die”**

1 Thessalonians 4 : 16 – Paul writes **“For the Lord himself will come down from heaven, with a loud command, with the voice of the archangel and with the trumpet call of God and the dead in Christ will rise first. After that, we who are still alive and are left will be caught up together with them in the clouds to the Lord in the air. And so we will be with the Lord for ever. Therefore encourage one another with these words.”**

God wants you to be encouraged and to know today, this Christmas time, that the grass withers and the flowers fall but his Word endures for ever, his Word is his son Jesus Christ and through faith in Jesus Christ you too will know eternal life together with all those who have gone before you, those whom you love around you today and those yet to be born.

Come, O come, Emmanuel!

AMEN