

Reading: Isaiah 43:14-28 (OT page 729)
Reader: J McFarlane

Background to the reading

I want to focus my sermon by reflecting on the following text verse:

¹⁸ "Forget the former things;
do not dwell on the past.
¹⁹ See, I am doing a new thing!
Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?
I am making a way in the desert
and streams in the wasteland.

There is definitely one thing that we all have in common, and that is that all of us have a past. To some it is a good one. Others may struggle to forget theirs because of suffering, abuse, violence, poverty and illness.

There is one thing we do not like doing at all, then it is to forget old differences and fights, and focus on the present whilst looking forward into the future. It seems that whenever a dispute occurs between couples, the past is always right at hand to ignite the fire! It also occurs when we argue with our children or grandchildren, our brothers and sisters, even with our friends. We are renowned for embracing the past like we would hold a wean. We often refer to the past whenever the situation arises without taking into consideration that times have moved on. It is also then so true that the past we do remember is often a mixture of idealistic and unrealistic things that we wanted to achieve. It seems as if we cannae stop using the past as an obstacle to any progress or new opportunity in the present.

Others are so caught up by their past, that they cannae live in the present or see a future. We hear it so many times in the stories of people that suffered abuse or addiction. We read it in the tragic letters of people who commit suicide. More and more children fall victim of neglect which will scar them for the rest of their lives. I am sure there are even people sitting in this church this morning that would want to deny some events that happened in their past.

And just like our personal lives, the general worldwide church also has a history, a past that is full of good moments but also not so good moments to remember. It is also true of every congregation in this land. I mean I am still reminded of the fact that Kirknewton church is the original Parish church which was build in the centre of the Parish in 1750. People tell me stories of previous ministers like Mr Turnbull, Mechie, Brown, MacColland Ballentyne. It is clear that to some these ministers are forever declared saints and that no minister in the present can ever compete with.

How do we forget the former things, and realise the reality of the present whilst looking at the future? The answer is that we must trust God with our past, present and future realities like Judah once did. We must ask God to help us as the Judeans did - to find meaning in our past, so that it can shape our present and directs us towards the future that He made possible for us!

So let's go back a few hundred centuries and look into the history of our passage:

Our reading reflects a very dark period in the history of the southern kingdom Judah namely their exile in the foreign country of Babylonia or Chaldea. It all happened in the years from 597 to 581 when the Chaldeans exiled the Judeans to Babylonia.

They left only a small part of the population which consisted mostly of the poorest of the poor. All the rest were captives. It all happened because they did not listen to the Lord their God's appeal and obeyed His commandments. They were untruthful to him and did not serve him in the way He expected them to serve him. They followed the idols and listened to these false gods and forgot about their real God, the God they made a covenant with! Yes they deserted their real God for the false and fake gods of their world. They did not listen to his warnings even after He told them what will be happening to them. They totally forgot about their past and how truthful and loyal and loving God has been. They totally lost sight of God's present warnings and as a consequence had no future to hold on to.

But now they are in exile. Some wanted to stay in Babylonia, while others only wanted to go back to Jerusalem. They had no future perspective of what their future would bring. They had no hope and were like people without any direction!

Then in our reading the prophet Isaiah tells them that the Lord God will forgive them and give them a new future. He will demonstrate his sovereignty by overthrowing the Chaldean Empire and bringing them back to their home country Judah. He will destroy the mighty power of the Chaldeans. He will help them even as they go through the Syrian Desert and provide in their every need like providing water to help them reduce/quench their thirst. Even the desert animals honour him for that! But they must repent. They must part with their sinful ways!

I do not think the Judeans was really very hopeful that they would return to their homeland. I think they were pretty sure that it will never ever happen. The Babylonians after all was a world power to be reckoned with.

Well, we can most certainly see in the events of history that it all happened just as God promised them. In the year 539 Cyrus of Persia overpowered Babylonia and allowed the Judeans to return to their homeland. He also helped them to rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. Amen

Sermon

So what does the text say to us this morning?

Well, we can most certainly see that God was true to his Word. But He did not only give them water the desert, He provided for us as well. He gave us the living water in Jesus Christ. He gave us an oasis in our deserts of despair, pain, and suffering. He changed our futures and shaped our present realities. He wiped out all our sins and transgressions. He gave us a new past, present and future in Jesus Christ and provides daily through his Holy Spirit. He gave us an opportunity on earth to be witnesses of His Holy Name.

God changed our lives forever. Through his Almighty power He allowed streams of grace to flow over us as sinful beings. He allowed a cross to be erected in the wasteland to save us from death, hell, and sin. Through ONE deed, God forgot all our former sins, and gave us the opportunity to live in the present with renewed faith, love, and hope. He made it possible for you and me to break with our sinful pasts and live a meaningful life in the present. He gave us the means to love Him, ourselves, and our neighbours. He gave us direction towards a new future.

We too, that is so often entangled by our pasts, needs to focus more on the promises of God and what He can do. If there is an event in our lives that hinders us to live in a relationship with God, if it is in our past or in our present, then we must ask God to help us to break free from it. If there is something that makes us feel guilty or ashamed, we must go to God and ask his forgiveness that we can serve Him in the present with joy whilst acknowledging what he has done in the past. And we must make sure that people trust us so that we can help them to deal with their past or their present realities in order for them to see God as their only saviour and help! The past is the only the past if we let it be.

I am not saying that the past do not exist. The past is important in so far it shapes the present and our future. Lessons needs to be learned but also reviewed in the light of and in the context of the present and future. If we do not live in the present and only dwell in the past, we would soon find ourselves as passengers on a flight to nowhere. We do not only find warnings of the consequences of such an attitude in the bible like we read this morning. We even find it in the national "anthem" of Scotland, when we sing: "Those days are passed now, And in the past they must remain".

Why is it so important that we take what is good from the past, focus on the present whilst looking at the future? Well, if we do not know our past, and God's working in it, how will we know or understand God's dealings with us in the present or the future. We cannae:

- ONLY live in the past,
- or ONLY in the present with no sense of tomorrow,

- or ONLY in the future with no sense of the past or the present.

We as a congregation need to look into the future with hope and anticipation. We must stop second guessing God. We cannot say, ah well, if we stop this or that, it will never start again. Who are we to say that? God is telling us this morning. Everything that happens in His church, in his congregations all over the land, comes from Him alone. We are humans and we must know our places. We need to trust in God and allow His Holy Spirit to direct, lead and help us find out what He wants us to do in the future.

The prophets acted on behalf of God and because of their obedience to God often felt the brunt of abuse, criticism and being marginalised. The people of Isaiah's time could not see past their present, clinging on to the good old days in Jerusalem. The same happened to Jesus when He changed the laws of his society and the religious establishment of his day. The same still happens today. Ministers often have to put up an enormous fight to convince their congregations of the will of God and to have hope in what He can do in the future. And the reason: a lot of people either cling on to the good old days or to a previous minister and cannot see beyond their present needs. It also happens to the church in general in Scotland. A lot of church leaders wants to have the same church that was so popular in days gone by!

Maybe the time has come for us as followers of Christ to listen to what God is saying to us as Christians living in Scotland in our present day, to what He is saying to us as a congregation in Kirknewton and East Calder:

See, I am doing a new thing!

Now it springs up; do you not perceive it?

I am making a way in the desert

and streams in the wasteland.

May we never ever doubt what God can do and will do, even despite you and me!

Amen