

Reading: Isaiah 5:1-7 (OT page 689)

Reader: S Ewins

Background to the reading

The book Isaiah are a collection of three parts, chapters 1-39, 40-55 and then 56-66, telling us about different historical moments in the history of God's people in Israel and Judah. At this time God's people were divided into two kingdoms namely the northern kingdom Israel or Ephraim, called after the biggest tribe and the Southern kingdom Judah with its capital Jerusalem. The Kingdom of Israel (or Northern Kingdom) existed as an independent state until 722 BCE when it was conquered by the Assyrian Empire; while the Kingdom of Judah (or Southern Kingdom) existed as an independent state until 586 BCE when it was conquered by the Babylonian Empire.

Our reading forms part of the larger chapter 1-12 which deals especially with issues in relation to Judah. The background to our passage is the Syro-Ephraimite War took place in the 8th century BC, when Assyria was a great regional power. The smaller nations of Syria (often called Aram) and the northern Kingdom of Israel (often called Ephraim because of the main tribe) formed a coalition in defense against the oncoming threat. They had previously been tributary nations to Assyria, and they finally decided to break away. The southern kingdom of Israel, known as Judah, refused to join the coalition. Judah was ruled by King Ahaz. In 735 BC Syria, under Rezin, and Israel, under Pekah, attempted to depose Ahaz through an invasion. Judah was being defeated and, according to 2 Chronicles, lost 120,000 troops in just one day. Many significant officials were killed, including the king's son. Many others were taken away as slaves. (Telling of the same war, 2 Kings 16:5 states that Rezin and Pekah besieged Jerusalem but failed to capture it.)

During the invasion, the Philistines and Edomites were taking advantage of the situation and raiding towns and villages within the Southern Kingdom. Ahaz called out to Tiglath-Pileser III of Assyria for help. The Assyrians defended Judah, conquering Israel, Syria, and the Philistines, but the post-war alliance only brought more trouble for the king of Judah. Ahaz had to pay tribute to Tiglath-Pileser III with treasures from the Temple in Jerusalem and the royal treasury. He also built idols of Assyrian gods in Judah to find favor with his new ally.

It all happened just because the kings of Judah and Israel did not listen to God and trusted in Him. They walked away from Him and went astray.

In our reading the prophet Isaiah warns the people of God through a love song. In this stunning song he says that his beloved (God) planted a vineyard and though much labourly love made such an effort to ensure that this vineyard yield good grapes.

The choice grapes of Palestine were famous for their size, some as big as plums. Huge clusters of grapes weighing 12 to 16 pounds are recorded. The vineyard was usually planted on a hill too steep for growing grain, and was surrounded by a protective wall made of stone or bushes. At harvest time the grapes were processed in the winepress on the premises of the vineyard. Vineyards were cultivated by their owners or hired hands. That the vineyard played a large part in the life of Israelites may be seen from the law making a person who had planted a vineyard exempt from the military service. Many people had no other financial resources than their vineyards.

He did everything possible to make sure the grapes will be good. He planted it on a fertile hillside, he fenced it off, he dug out all the stones, and planted the best vines. But it yielded only wild grapes.

In the second stanza the Farmer (God) asks the people of Judah if He could have done anything better for the vineyard. The accused are now asked to deliver a judgement over themselves. I think the answer is obvious. Because it yielded only wild grapes, it must be taken out and destroyed.

In the last stanza the prophet brings the charge to them: Did the Lord find right? Nothing but riot! Did He find decency? Only despair.
Amen

MP 792

You are the vine

Sermon

The text verse for the sermon is verse 1 “I will sing for the one I love a song about his vineyard: My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside. “

On Friday the world celebrated Valentines day and I hope that most of you has been treated well by your loved ones. I know that a lot of people do not agree with this human invention and many see it only as a money making opportunity by the big businesses. I will not argue any different.

But in a way it is sad that the world actually needs a day to love or to show love. As Christian people we need to show love every moment of everyday. So why does the world have a day like this and why is it so popular? It is perhaps because we as Christian followers of Jesus have neglected His command to love? Is it because you and I do not know anymore HOW to love?

Well if we are in doubt we just need to look at our reading again and hear the loving despair of God who tried everything possible to help His beloved people. But time and time again they made the wrong choices. Instead of loving God they walked away.

But God's love did not end here. In the New Testament he decided to erect another vineyard. But this time he made sure His only Son Jesus Christ is the VINE. And He made sure that everyone who believes in Him, is part of the VINE. Again He planted it on a hill called Golgotha, He fenced it off and He even appointed a Gardener His Holy Spirit. So there is no excuse anymore for the branches not to bear good fruit. The only we will know if we are still part of the VINE is through love. If we loose LOVE, the sacrificial love for God and everyone around us, then we are no ,longer part of the VINE and then we will only bear wild fruit.

So let us love again, unconditionally. Let us start a new movement where everyone in the villages can see that we love. But it must be clear that we love differently. We love by serving God, by forgiving, by turning the other cheek, by not being rude, by not gossiping and telling tales, by sharing everything we have, by looking after one another, by deeds of thanksgiving and always having a smile.

In the week a South African living in London caused quite an uproar on Facebook with a comment saying "He is cross with Jesus. Not always the almighty one, is he..." It transpired that he is cross with Jesus for not protecting his wife's family in South Africa after they have been attacked. The granddaughter, a toddler was strangled to the point that she fainted, which saved her life as they thought she is dead. They then poked the grandmother with a sharp knife all over her body.

In a way I think we can all understand his doubt. But equally God cannot be blamed for what these senseless thugs did. God gives us all choices, a choice to love or a choice to hate, a choice to build up and a

choice to destroy. We do not know of all the efforts that God had to persuade these senseless thugs otherwise. Just like Israel and Judah they condemned themselves for not listening to God. And these thugs did not portray the love of God.

May God help us to not to be deterred when loveless acts of violence disturb our peace and love, may He help us to be fruitful green branches to His vine bearing fruits of love everywhere we go. May His forgiving love help us when we do not feel loved or appreciated. And may we always remain in His Holy VINE!

Let us pray:

Thank you for fruitfulness, God,
and thank you for pruning;
for seasons of abundance
when the fruits of our living
bend the bough of life.
And for times of cutting back,
when all that is dry and dead
must be rooted out for new life to flourish.
We are your garden, God, we are your vineyard.
Thank you for your loving tending.
Amen