

**Day 1 – Isaiah 2:1-5 ‘Swords into ploughshares’**

A couple of years ago, at the All-Age service for Remembrance at All Saints, I showed the congregation a paper clip, and asked them to come up with as many creative alternative uses for this simple object as possible. We had about 75 young people there, representing the uniformed organisations, and they weren’t short of ideas! Alongside the more obvious ones – replacement zip, for example – we had other more left-field options: fingernail cleaner, cheap nose-ring (don’t try either of those at home), and even strawberry huller i.e. removing the green stalk out of the fruit!

It was a fun exercise and reminded me that I grew up with the joys of ‘The A-team’ on TV, where the stars would be locked in a garage every episode, and somehow fashion a complex mechanical device out of a few bits of wood and a plastic sheet. Those were the days, eh?

But there’s a more serious side to these games as well. This week, we’ll be leading up to Remembrance by looking at 5 famous passages in the book of Isaiah, all themed around the idea of peace; and in today’s passage we see the most famous biblical ‘alternative use’ of them all. To a small and fragile nation surrounded by hostile forces, and tired of violence, God promises that one day, *things will be different*. God will restore this fragmented world (v2), and people will seek God in unprecedented ways and in countless numbers (v3).

And the acid test of this new era will be that, across the world, *swords will be turned into ploughs* (v4). Implements that were used for fighting would now be used to grow food: a sign of healing and prosperity.

Sadly our world has not reached this era yet, despite the noble intentions of pan-global organisations like the United Nations, where, significantly, a statue of this very image stands outside its headquarters. But this passage promises that such a day is coming. Our God is a God who transforms, who restores, who brings peace for all. Peace with Himself, but also with ourselves, those around us, and ultimately all creation.

And *this work of transformation goes on in our lives, too*. God calls us to turn our own swords of division into ploughs of peace. If that strikes a chord, take a moment today to pray God’s peace into a particular situation or relationship.

The world is an anxious place at present. It has always been thus. But it is not the whole story. And as we seize this great truth by faith, may we too live the final verse today: Come, people of God, let us walk in the light of the Lord.

**Day 2 – Isaiah 9:2-7 ‘The Prince of Shalom’**

As I write this morning, the people of America are going to the polls to elect their president for the next four years. The stakes are high: many commentators see this not so much as a choice between two candidates, but between two radically different visions of the society America wants to be. It's not for me to comment here on the rights and wrongs of those competing visions – but what did sadden me as I watched the news this morning was the sight of shopkeepers in many towns and cities across America boarding up their stores yesterday, for fear of potential violence by a small minority of whichever side loses the election.

Needless to say, the whole point of democracy is that societies are no longer governed by which side has the biggest fists or guns. However it is also a timely reminder in this week of Remembrance that peace in this world remains fragile and hard to maintain, however sophisticated we consider ourselves to be.

Today's famous passage picks up where yesterday's left off. Isaiah has another great vision of the peace that God will ultimately bring to this fractured world. Admittedly the context is set more in terms of a victory for God's people: nevertheless it is equally clear that, in this vision of a healed world, there will be no more need for armies or violence – blood-soaked boots and clothes will be burned and done away with forever (v5).

But this vision in ch9 goes a step further than ch2 – *there will be a focal point for this new era of peace*. A child will be born who carries divine authority, who will usher in and oversee this restoration of all things. And this child will have wonderful names, including perhaps the loveliest of all, certainly the most appropriate for this week: the Prince of Peace. Or, to use the original word, the Prince of Shalom.

Shalom is now translated peace, but its meaning is much broader than our traditional definition. It means completeness or wholeness, the sense of everything being put right, perfected. This kind of shalom is much more than merely the absence of conflict, *it is an active state of complete wellbeing*. (For a deeper exploration of shalom, watch this great video – 4 minutes of your life well spent ☺:  
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=oLYORLZOaZE> )

This is the destiny which God intends for his world. And he will achieve it through the son which he gives (v6). *Jesus is the Prince of Shalom*. No wonder the angels cry out at his birth: 'on earth peace to those on whom his favour rests!' (Luke 2:14)

So as we pray for America today, and as we pray for ourselves with lockdown looming large on the horizon, let's give thanks that, above and beyond our human leaders, there reigns a greater, divine leader, one whose vision for the world is ultimately for complete wellbeing for all people, and whose vision *will* one day come to pass: Jesus, the Prince of Shalom. And may that divine shalom be ours today.

**Day 3 – Isaiah 11:1-10 ‘Not forgotten’**

Remember, remember, the 5<sup>th</sup> of November.... so the old nursery rhyme goes, and one that we learned at school. I imagine you may have done too! Sadly, not too many firework displays are likely to happen this evening, but it's a small price to pay in the grand scheme of things.

And today's passage is another trip down memory lane: in this case prophetic memory lane. About 250 years previously, God had promised King David – son of Jesse – that one of his descendants would inherit his throne forever. A dozen kings had come and gone, the kingdom had split in two and the northern half was about to be conquered... when would this new King come?

*God hadn't forgotten.* And God gives the great prophet Isaiah a new vision which reassures the people that his promise still stands. There would be a new king, descended from David (v1). This king would be filled with God's Spirit (v2) and would stand for justice and righteousness (vv4-5) – something many of Israel's kings had conspicuously failed to do. And under this new king, there would be a new reign of peace, and a healing of the created order such that even predators would get cosy with their prey (vv6-8). It would, in short, be glorious, and global (v10).

What a vision! Even so, it took another 700 years for the king to come. God's timing is not ours. And that can be unsettling, testing even. There are times when we too may feel forgotten by God; maybe something we believe he has promised us hasn't arrived yet. And that causes us pain, and perhaps doubt as well.

But *God never forgets.* The branch always bears fruit from the root. And God calls us to step out again, to dare to believe in his faithfulness. As it was said of Aslan in The Lion, The Witch and The Wardrobe: 'He's not safe – but he is good!'

Today, take a moment to claim again the promises that God has given you. They might be specific, or if there isn't a particular thing, claim some of the great promises in our passage today.

God remembers. And it's good for us to remember, too. We are what we remember.

**Day 4 – Isaiah 52:7-10 ‘Beautiful feet’**

A few months ago I watched the Sound of Music for the first time in many years. I'll always remember my first viewing of the film – after Charles and Di's wedding in July 1981. We watched the 'wedding of the century' then all sat and watched The Sound of Music as a family. Perfect.

And it's hard to beat the scene at the end of the film, watching the family walking across the mountain-top to freedom. How lovely on the mountains are the feet of those bringing good news. Especially if they can sing close harmony as well.

In the case of the Von Trapp family, the good news was primarily personal – but here in today's passage, the good news is altogether more universal.

It's likely that the latter chapters of Isaiah were written in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century, after Jerusalem had been conquered and destroyed by the Babylonian army – hence the reference to 'ruins of Jerusalem' in v9. Good news was in short supply. Where was hope?

*Hope was coming.* The watchmen would see it and find joy (v8). The ruins themselves would sing (v9). And over the mountains would come feet bringing good news (v7).

600 years later, those feet would announce the good news that the kingdom of God was near. Those feet would travel up the hillside to deliver the Beatitudes, to hear Peter's confession of the Christ and to meet Moses and Elijah. But a short while later, those same feet would also climb Mount Moriah, carrying a cross lashed across their owner's back.

*God's good news is sure, and true.* But it's more than 'the hills are alive', lovely as that is. It came at a great cost. As we'll see tomorrow, its beauty lay in sacrifice. Peace was won the hard way.

Nevertheless, it remains good news – more than that, it's still the best news I ever heard! And although it came after great waiting and at great cost, nothing is more true than the final words of the passage: All the ends of the earth will see the salvation of our God.

We are part of God's big salvation story. Give thanks for those beautiful feet that brought good news to you.

**Day 5 – Isaiah 53:4-6 ‘Healed by his wounds’**

‘Look! The Lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world.’

John the Baptist’s iconic words addressed to Jesus in the first chapter of John’s gospel are rooted in today’s famous passage. Ever since the time of Exodus, the image of the sacrificial lamb had come to symbolise God’s rescue of his people. Every year, at Passover, all Jewish families would re-enact God’s salvation by the Red Sea, and a dish of lamb would be at the heart of the meal.

But something new was coming. The servant songs of Isaiah, which are studded through the later chapters of the book, promise a new rescue and a new rescuer. This anointed one (Messiah) would carry great authority and integrity, would stand for justice, and would bring salvation, not just to Israel, but to the world. This servant would be ‘raised and lifted up and highly exalted’ (52:13), and earthly kings would ‘shut their mouths because of him’ (52:15).

There’s a sting in the tail, however. Because it’s not the whole story. This same servant would not just be the Lion of Judah – he would also be the Lamb, sacrificed for all. Indeed he would be ‘led like a lamb to the slaughter’ (v7). Why? Verses 4-6 make it clear. ‘He was pierced for our transgressions, he was crushed for our iniquities.’ All our human selfishness, all our rebellion against God, placed upon his shoulders – *so that we might have peace.* (v5)

‘No peace without justice’ – so has sung many a liberation movement in recent decades. In today’s passage, we are addressing the ultimate yardstick of justice – our standing before Almighty God. And it is the Lamb who symbolises God’s perfect justice and mercy. God takes the punishment himself, that we might be healed, that we might have peace.

Tomorrow, we’ll remember and honour the sacrifice of so many in war, and give thanks for the peace that we now share. But today, let’s remember an even greater sacrifice which won an even deeper peace. And may the good news that, through Jesus’ sacrifice, we have peace with God cause us to give thanks; may it lift our hearts today and fill us with his abiding presence.

*Look! The Lamb of God which takes away the sin of the world... Lord, we are not worthy to come into your presence – and but only say the word, and we shall be healed. Amen.*

**Day 6 – Psalm 25 ‘Not forgotten’**

God has not forgotten you.

At the risk of sounding like a scratched record (and I have plenty of those, as Alise will tell you), I want to start where I left off in yesterday’s service reflection. *You are not forgotten.*

The world is a big and confusing place, and our current news headlines only serve to reinforce that. It’s all ‘big stuff’ – global pandemics, lockdowns, era-defining elections, climate change... It’s all important, and we need to know about it. But it only serves to reinforce how small we are.

Most of us have laughed over the years at some of the stories you would find in the local press, but I believe the recent dramatic decline of local newspapers has had one very significant negative: for all that we might mock stories about blocked drains, cats up trees and wobbly bus shelters, it reminds us that our world is full of individuals – mostly ordinary people like you and me. People that we might even know. In effect, *we were part of the news, we were part of the story.*

We might not feel much part of any news story now. But *we are still part of God’s story.* It is a comfort to know that even King David sometimes felt like a nobody, surrounded by bigger forces and troubles. Psalm 25 is David’s heartfelt response: ‘In you, O lord, I put my trust.... No-one whose hope is in you will ever be put to shame.’ (v1,v3)

At the heart of the psalm is a plea for remembrance: ‘According to your love, remember me, for you, O Lord, are good.’ (v7) *God remembers because he loves.* He remembers David – and he remembers us.

Interestingly David also asks God to forget something – ‘the sins of his youth’ (v7). Or rather, to remember it no more: in other words, God consciously chooses not to remember the bad stuff in our lives once we ask him to forgive it. Instead, he remembers mercy, the mercy which God has always possessed ‘from of old’ (v6).

In this week that lockdown has returned, many of us might echo the words of v16-17 as our prayer for today: ‘Turn to me and be gracious to me, for I am lonely and afflicted. Relieve the troubles of my heart and free me from my anguish.’

It’s a good prayer. One of the great comforts of our faith is that we can be honest with God. We don’t have to pretend to be happy or untroubled, for fear that God will squish us. The true validation of God’s parenthood in our lives is precisely that we can take our bad stuff to him, asking not just for forgiveness, but also protection (v20) and guidance (v4).

I’ll end as I started: God has not forgotten you. He remembers you, according to his love. Bring him your troubles, pour out your heart, and place your trust in him again. No-one who does that will ever be put to shame.

**Day 7 – Psalm 63 ‘The night watch’**

Peter Kay's adverts for John Smith's Bitter 10 or 15 years ago still rank as some of my favourite ads of all time (I used to test and research ads for a living, so I've always had a soft spot for the ad break). One of the best starred Kay as a dad comforting his little daughter as she lay crying in bed at night. ‘What’s the matter?’ asks Kay. ‘I’m scared of the monster hiding in my cupboard,’ replies his daughter. ‘You don’t need to worry about that – look!’ reassures Kay, opening the cupboard door. ‘It’s the robber climbing in through the window you should be scared about.’

(Rest assured, he won’t be joining our church pastoral care team anytime soon...)

The night hours can be challenging for many of us. We may no longer fear the monster under our bed or in the cupboard, but it’s amazing how small problems can seem so much bigger at night. And big problems can seem HUGE.

We toss and turn, we feel our heartbeat quicken. We may even get up and walk around to calm ourselves down. And then when morning comes – some of those things that haunted us suddenly don’t seem so bad. At least until night returns.

Little children often have ‘the night terrors.’ But it’s not unknown for us adults, either. Physical darkness can be a time of spiritual darkness too.

In our psalm today, we learn that King David knows what that feels like. And let’s be clear: it’s not caused by a lack of closeness to God. That’s a great lie the devil tells us, especially in the wee small hours – and it’s not true. When we worry at night, we are not facing condemnation for a lack of faith. Banish that thought! King David has seen God’s power and glory (v2), and dedicates his life to praise (v4,v5). He is close to God, but he’s not immune.

David’s solution to night worries is *to focus on what he chooses to remember*. When David frets in the darkness, he remembers his Lord (v6) – if need be, he keeps coming back to God through the night. He *sings* (quietly?) if he has to (v7). And he *clings* (v8) – he’s not afraid to cry out for help in the depths of his heart.

Think, sing and cling – it’s a bit cheesy, but it’s not a bad strategy. When your worries surround you in the quiet hours, choose to remember God: let him rest at the heart of your being, and consciously invite him back into the midst of your problems. Sing praise songs and hymns under your breath, claiming God’s truth and power over those worries. And don’t be afraid to cry ‘help!’. Only God hears – but God is the only one who needs to hear.

And however long the night lasts, *daylight always comes*. God’s mercies come to us afresh every morning. May those mercies come to us today – in light and darkness.

**Day 8 – Psalm 22:22-31 ‘All will remember’**

Today is Remembrance Day. At the 11<sup>th</sup> hour of the 11<sup>th</sup> day of the 11<sup>th</sup> month in 1918, the armistice was signed and peace was declared to mark the end of the Great War. Around the world today, people will mark this moment in different ways, and take an opportunity to remember.

The Great War was the first truly global conflict, and its toll of human suffering was immense. Sadly it proved to be just the first of a number of pan-global conflicts through the 20<sup>th</sup> century (although we officially count only two). Nevertheless, it is also true that for many of us, our personal or family memory of conflict is, thankfully, far removed from our experience. Europe in particular has witnessed an almost unparalleled period of peace for the last 75 years – though the fact that it is so unusual is no great advert for humanity’s capacity to avoid violence and conflict.

Which makes it all the more important to treasure peace, and to remember what war is really like. ‘Lest we forget,’ is a common phrase used at this time of year, and rightly so.

As we conclude our short series on remembering, today’s Psalm also points us towards *a global act of remembering*. This act is also birthed in costly sacrifice, as God’s chosen one is ‘poured out like water’ (v14) and pierced in hands and feet (v16). Though the psalm never reveals the reason for this, Psalm 22 has come to represent a hugely significant prophecy of the Messiah, one that Jesus himself cries out 1,000 years later on the very cross which pierced his own hands and feet.

Yet *through this sacrifice comes victory*. Not in a physical battle but a spiritual one. The one who is sacrificed is then exalted (v29), people will serve this Saviour (v30) and generations to come will praise him, rejoicing in his victory (v31).

This act will be so significant that ‘all will remember...’ (v27). All will remember... what? The Lord. There will be a global turning to God, as people seek the Lord (v26), and recognise his power in the affairs of the world (v28).

The sacrifice of the Son achieves something permanent and glorious – and still today, the church declares to anyone ready to listen: ‘He has done it!’ (v31).

*So today, let us remember.* Let us remember the sacrifices of so many. Let us remember those who continue to pay the price of war and violence. Let us remember the value of peace, and what it costs to maintain it.

And let us also remember the greater peace won by our Lord. Let us remember what God has done, and that we are now part of a great global movement for the restoration of all things. Let us recommit ourselves to the path of divine peace, won at such a cost.

‘Those who seek the Lord will praise him... Posterity will serve him.... They will proclaim his righteousness to a people yet unborn: He has done it!’ Amen.