

THIRD ISAIAH

ISAIAH 55.1 – 56.8

Isaiah and Jeremiah Series

OPENING PRAYER

Lord, we come together from our homes and digs, from our work and play, from our business and cares. Create in us attentive hearts, ready to hear your word, that we may see our world afresh, and discern your will for us in our daily living. Amen

EXEGESIS

This is the opening of what is known as Third Isaiah. This section appears to be less of a cohesive whole than the previous sections. There is no recognisable 'call', unless 55. 1-5 or 61.1-4 is thought to be such. Historically we appear to be in the early days of the restoration of Jerusalem (c. 538-520 BCE). This process takes many years (cf. Haggai, Zechariah, and later Ezra and Nehemiah). There is still a feeling of hope, but also of disappointment as all the old bad habits reappear. Above all there is a fundamental tension. For whom is this hope intended? On the one hand there had been many movements of peoples throughout the region in the turbulent time of the conquests so the retuning Jews found themselves in a strange, multi-cultural situation. The survival of Israel, it was argued (cf. Ezra), depended on reasserting their distinctiveness. On the other hand, following the lead given by Second Isaiah (52. 1-12), a universal God will be open to receive all who wish to join. Jerusalem, therefore, should become a symbol of this all-embracing future- a beacon, drawing all to its light (65. 17-25).

55. The challenge is laid down. In this market place, goods are given freely. This is the mark of God's grace. The old covenant made to David will be renewed (55. 3). But now the promise is to all nations because they will want to identify themselves with this God who has brought the People of God back to their homeland (55. 5). So the call goes out: this is the opportunity (55. 6-7). Such generosity may be hard to comprehend but it is the prerogative of the creator God (55. 8-11). Even the earth itself participates in the new age. 56. 1-8. The theme is taken up again in two, separate short oracles. 56. 1 echoes the constant prophetic demand for justice. Here, however, the sign of loyalty is keeping the Sabbath. This is because the sign of God's restoration is that once again the sacred rituals can be celebrated. Those who rejoice in this will want to keep the feasts. When, therefore, the stranger or foreigner wants to join in the celebration they are to be welcomed (56. 3, 5-6; cf. Leviticus 19. 18; Acts 8.26-40). However, Isaiah goes even further, for even the eunuchs are to be included (56. 3-5; cf. Acts 8. 26-40). In the ancient world eunuchs were slaves- often with considerable power, but permanently excluded from society. In Israel, they were 'unholy' under the Law. Now, however, God is breaking through the barriers of exclusion, welcoming all (cf. Acts 10; Luke 19. 46).

REFLECTION AND QUESTIONS

(i). Once again there is a contrast between that which is truly satisfying and the false promises laid out in the market stalls (55. 1-2). What is the secret? The answer is two-fold: to enter into a covenant with God and to change direction. These are bound together. A covenant is a binding agreement. Here, as is usual with Hebrew covenants, it is God who takes the initiative and, in doing so, makes a binding promise (55. 3). The point is that it is God who acts and stands guarantor, who opens the door and bids welcome. Such a covenant stands despite the fickleness of human nature. Our challenge is to discern the promise and embrace it. In other words- to change direction, walking towards God rather than turn away. This is the true nature of repentance, meaning a reorientation to the truth rather than a confession of sin. Those who turn to God will be embraced freely into God's Kingdom. Discuss some of the tempting promises made in today's cultural and social market place and suggest their failings. Does the passage suggest any alternatives?

(ii). One of the problems with God is that God does not act or react in ways we would assume to be natural and sensible (55. 8-9). We cannot penetrate the mystery of God who is beyond our understanding and experience, yet who keeps turning up with surprises and is reaching out to us in grace. Recount some instances where God has seemingly changed a person's direction. What are the signs that it might have been God intervening?

(iii). God is always working to break down false barriers and opening horizons. Suggest some of the ways we have been called to revise the boundaries of exclusion in our own time. Are there any more that need to be attended to? What are the criteria by which such changes should be judged? How difficult is it to welcome the stranger?

(iv). Group identity is important for personal well-being. Discuss the differences between defensive identity, which tends to put up barriers at the entrance point, and open identity, which looks to a clarity of aim and/or loyalty. Are these in contrast or are both necessary?

CLOSING PRAYER

We bind unto ourselves this day; The strong name of the trinity, By invocation of the same,
The Three in One and One in Three. Amen.

SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER READING

- John Eaton: Mysterious Messengers. SCM, 2013.
- Gordon McConville: Exploring the Old Testament Prophets. SPCK, 2002.