

All Saints Talk for 26 May 2024

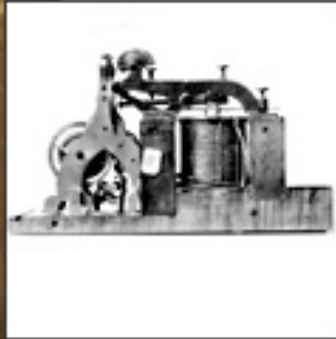
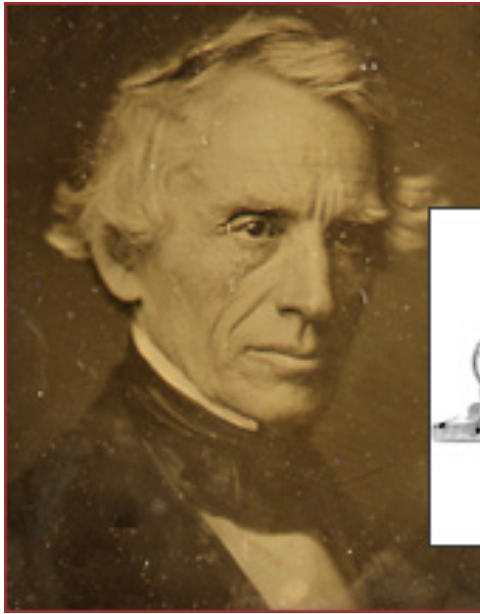
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Trinity Sunday

Vision for God's Word Readings: *Isaiah 55:1-13* *Vision for the thirsty*

After taking a break from our series last week for Pentecost, today we are returning to Isaiah and this wonderful passage from chapter 55 which you might call *God's great invitation*. Previous chapters highlighted the failure of the people of Israel and Judah to produce the kind of fruitful lives God is looking for. So then we are introduced to God's plan of redemption - the suffering servant – the one who would establish a new worldwide Kingdom of justice, peace and righteousness. Now here in chapter 55 the invitation goes out to the whole world with a great big RSVP to come and join in And like an envelope you receive in the post with 'Important communication – do not ignore' on it, this chapter not only sets out the invitation itself but also highlights a Vision for God's Word – just how important it is to take this invitation seriously.

1844 could be considered a foundational year for all the electrical communications systems that we use today. A message was sent from Capitol Hill in Washington to a sub-station in Baltimore using electrical signals along miles of wire. The message, which was encoded using a system of short and long pulses known as Morse Code, was rather cryptic – it said '*What God hath wrought.*' When he was asked about the content of this very first telegram, Professor Samuel Morse said 'I never felt I deserved the honours that came to me from America and Europe because of the invention associated with my name. I had made a valuable application of the use of electrical power, but it was all through God's help.' He described how when he got stuck trying to overcome obstacles, he said he simply 'prayed for more light' and when he succeeded, he said 'It wasn't because I was superior to other scientists. When the Lord wanted to bestow this gift on mankind, He has to use someone. I'm just grateful He chose to reveal it to me.'



Communication is key. Our desire to communicate is one of the markers of the image of God in us. Communication is itself a creative agent, able to grow relationships and initiate practical change.

As Professor Morse discovered in 1844 and I have found throughout my life, God is a God of communication who will bring revelation when we call on him with a desire to honour him. After all he is the creator who knows all the secrets and discoveries of the universe. It would be rude not to call on him while we can! In the beginning when God said 'let there be light', there was light. The words he speaks are not just commentary, they carry authority and creativity. When God speaks a word into your life it is absolutely transformational – if we will receive it and let it take root in us. So it essential that we have a vision for the power of God's word and that we expect him to speak to us. So this invitation in Isaiah 55 is not simply words but they carry creative power to enable us to join in the banquet of the Kingdom right where we are.

*55 "Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;
and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!
Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.*

*² Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

³ Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.

There is a deep thread running through Scripture of God inviting us to come and listen to him. Jesus echoed these words when he attended a feast in Jerusalem when he got up and shouted in a loud voice 'anyone who is thirsty, come to me and drink'. God does not force himself on us. We have to respond to him, and this chapter contains some key principles for discipleship which can take our relationship deeper with the Lord and tune us in to receive and understand his word for us today.

The first principle is to Seek the Lord while we still can.

Verse 6, *Seek the Lord while he may be found, call on him while he is near.* God invites *everyone* to seek him and call upon him, but this window of opportunity will not always be open, like it is right now.

The Second part of Isaiah was written to encourage the Jews who were forced to scrape a living in exile away from their homeland and temple. But even 70 years later when they were freed to return and start rebuilding they still remained spiritually enslaved. It was only when Jesus came after 700 years that the temple curtain was torn in two and he brokered the offer of permanent forgiveness and relationship with God through the cross. But the New Testament warns us that a day is coming when Christ will return to judge the living and the dead and we cannot just ignore it. No-one is beyond redemption but only some choose to embrace it. In the closing minutes of his life, Jesus promised the repentant thief on the cross next to that he would be with him in paradise, but the other thief let his anger dominate him and he died a wretched death without hope and a future. One thief submitted to Jesus, the other sneered at him but it was their choice and time is running out for us to make our choice too.

The second principle is to Turn to the Lord

Verse 7 says ⁷ 'Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him **turn** to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.'

We have a tendency to want to do things in our own way and be independent. Many times at the crematorium I have been saddened to hear Frank Sinatra's 'I did it my way' played at the end of funerals because it sums up the spirit of our age,

which is more about celebrating our way than seeking God's way. And I say that pointedly because I believe there is a spiritual battle going on for the heart and soul of our culture. Increasingly one of our most seemingly sacred values is the freedom of self expression. You may have heard of the influential book called 'Homo Deus' which means 'God-Man' because the author Yuval Harari believes we are increasingly seeing ourselves in God-like terms. Through a potent combination of humanism and technological advancement, western society is marching towards digital immortality unfettered by external ethical moral constraints. But the Bible warns Mr Harari, 'where there is no Godly vision, the people perish.'

How many times do you hear people saying 'Do whatever makes you feel good'? Or 'Just do whatever you feel is right?'

It's a popular phrase in our culture often quoted by celebrities that rarely gets challenged. The rapper Jay Z who is the wealthiest musical artist in the world promoted a sweatshirt bearing another version of it: 'Do what thou wilt'.



This is a quote from Aleistair Crowley, a guy whom the Beatles and Led Zeppelin revered in the 60s who openly called himself Anti-Christ, practised sexualised magic, and declared in 1904 that the Age of the Church was at an end. Crowley's mantra may be gaining more popularity as people reject anything that seems to restrict self-expression.

But Isaiah calls us to forsake our own ways in favour of God's way.

To simply do whatever we want, to think we know how to love or even think in a more evolved way than the bible suggests is to elevate ourselves over God. We become God's judge instead of submitting to His higher ways.

Does that mean Christianity is about brainwashing? Well I guess to a certain extent, yes! Because I know the thoughts that go through my mind and I know that not all of them are honouring to God. I want them washed and cleaned up. If I have seen or said something unhelpful, I pray that God would erase the memory of it from my mind.

The third principle is to Trust the Lord

Thankfully God promises to freely pardon if we turn to him in repentance, and yield ourselves to his ways. Verse 8 and 9 tell us that God might not conform to our plans and we may not understand what is going on or what he is doing, but we have to trust that his ways are good rather than judging Him by our standards.

Then we need to Listen to the Lord

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹ so is my **word** that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

There is a book called *the Heavenly man* which is a fascinating biography of a Chinese Pastor called Brother Yun. I met him at a meeting in Malvern and he kindly prayed for me.



When he was young, Brother Yun's family did not have a Bible but he began asking his mother all about Jesus. In response, his mother would simply tell him that Jesus was the Son of God and that all His teachings were recorded in the Bible.

Brother Yun said he wanted a Bible but of course in China at the time they couldn't just go out and buy one. His mother recalled that there was a man in another village who had one, but when they visited the man, he was too afraid to show it to Brother Yun. Instead he suggested that he should pray and ask God for one. So Brother Yun decided to fast and pray for a Bible. For the next 100 days, he ate only one bowl of steamed rice every day. One day at 4am, after fasting for 100 days, he saw a vision. In the vision, he was walking up a steep hill and trying to push a heavy cart at the same time. The cart was about to roll back and fall on him when he saw three men walking down the hill in the opposite direction. One of them was a kind old man and he was pulling a large cart of fresh bread. When the old man saw Brother Yun, he asked him if he was hungry. He said 'yes' and started crying. The old man then took a red bag of bread from his cart and asked his two servants to give it to Brother Yun. As he put the bread into his mouth, it immediately turned into a Bible.

When he woke up, Brother Yun began in vain to search for the Bible, but all of a sudden, he heard a faint knock on the door and someone was calling out his name. Immediately, he recognised the voice – it was the same voice he had heard in the vision. He quickly opened the door and standing before him were two of men he had seen in the vision. They were pastors who had been sent from an evangelist with instructions to come to this house. One of them held a red bag in his hand. In this red bag was a Bible.

That Bible became Brother Yun's prized possession. How hungry are you for the Word of God?

We have multiple Bibles at home, but sometimes I think we can take God's Word for granted.

Hebrews 4v12 says

¹² For the word of God is alive and active. Sharper than any double-edged sword, it penetrates even to dividing soul and spirit, joints and marrow; it judges the thoughts and attitudes of the heart.

Often when I have a quiet time I try to write down at least one verse of scripture, and allow it to percolate in my spirit as I meditate on it. If you don't know what to read, try picking up a Bible reading plan. Some chapters from the Old and New Testament, plus a Psalm or some proverbs for the day. Amongst each day's readings there will usually be something which warms your heart or makes you feel uncomfortable. Good – perhaps the Lord is speaking to you!

The surest way to hear God's voice is to read the Bible, not as a literary work, but as a living letter from God to you. If you struggle with reading, then try one of the Audio versions available on-line.

The bible is centred and anchored in the person of Jesus - 'the Living Word', who said "The words I have spoken to you—they are full of the Spirit and life" (John 6:63).

When I face any situation, I look to God's word for answers. I ask first what did Jesus say about it, then I ask what did Jesus' followers say about it and then what did Jesus' ancestors say about it?

And the promise of Isaiah 55v11 is that God's word is always purposeful – even reading it out is helpful in itself. It's not just dry text on a page to be criticised or over-analysed. It is there for a purpose and the purpose is to change lives and situations.

The secret to living an abundant life is not 'Do what thou wilt.' Instead it is to discover and do what God's will is, by listening, receiving and trusting in God's word.

Then the results of that Word-saturated life are captured in verse 12 and 13:

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

Joy and peace belong to those who turn to the Lord, listen to his voice and are led by his instructions.

And this is not joy and peace just on a personal basis only but something the whole of creation welcomes too. When you hear God's voice, the world changes into glorious Technicolor. You start to see God's purpose and design all around you. The mountains and hills do not simply appear as geological rock formations, the trees will no longer be inanimate objects - instead creation suddenly echoes the music of God's design- all is beautiful and purposeful.

When God's people call upon him and respond to his promptings, the whole land is blessed. (If ever there was a text for an environmental ethic this is it.)

Instead of chaotic thornbushes and briers, God uses us to transform the landscape and literally change the culture.

God's Word is purposeful and his purposes are being worked out here today too. He is inviting you to join him today – will you respond?