Sunday 7th August 2022

Isaiah 1: 1, 10-20

Faithful, not perfect

It was two weeks ago that I spoke from the first chapter of Hosea. A prophet in Israel, the Northern kingdom. The first act that he was asked to perform as he began his prophetic ministry was to marry a harlot, an adulterous wife.

It was a physical reality that Hosea would have to live through and experience personally. It reflected how God felt about His chosen people and was a lived-out witness to those around Hosea. Just as Hosea’s wife, Gomer turned away from Hosea to others, gave herself to anyone and belittled the relationship with Hosea, so had the people of Israel turned from God. They had given themselves to idols and had not remained pure to and for God.

The personal experience must have added weight and realism to the messages that Hosea delivered on behalf of God in his ministry.

Today we look at the first part of Isaiah. That first verse introduces the whole book “The vision concerning Judah”. Isaiah was a prophet in Judah, the Southern kingdom. But the book is a vision. It was not simply words that Isaiah had heard, but a vision which he had seen – another personal experience that underlined his words.

Israel and Judah, although split into two nations by the choices made by the people and human kings, was still seen by God as His chosen people – His children. The fact that He was trying to reach both nations in similar ways shows that there was no national distinction in God’s eyes.

Isaiah implores those around to hear the word of the Lord and addresses them as rulers of Sodom and people of Gomorrah. Those two cities had been destroyed generations ago, but they were notorious images of extreme sinfulness. Isaiah in this address identified those listening with being as sinful as those nations.

Similar to when Jesus addressed Peter as though he was satan.

This simple address was to show just how far from God the people had turned. Isaiah continues reporting God’s feelings towards the sacrifices being given and the festivals. “I am weary of bearing them”.

Hosea and Isaiah were both mouthpieces for God at a time when God’s children were being unfaithful.

God brings judgement on the sacrifices that were being offered, as well as prayer. But isn’t that what was required by the law? Observing offerings, prayer and celebration of festivals? Remembering the good things that God had done?

Why was God so angry? The revelation comes in verse 17 “Seek justice, encourage the oppressed. Defend the cause of the fatherless, plead the case of the widow”.

All the laws that God had provided was to attain a community where all were equal, children of God, equal worth and value, and the vulnerable should be protected, loved and cared for.

Although people were still making sacrifices to God, they had become ritualistic. They were not signs reflecting their attitude – just something that had to be done.

Prayer likewise can become a shopping list of expectations on God – rather than building relationship and living in a way that reflected the heart behind the prayers.

God’s people had turned their back on Him – they were not prepared to give their whole self or suffer any discomfort in living and acting solely for Him.

Just like an unfaithful wife.

But how do we perceive faithful? Is it a one-way thing? Are we allowed to go our own way and always rely on God to be there when we decide to turn to Him? But what about when God allows something bad to happen, well, He is hard-hearted, doesn’t care, a God of punishment?

How often do we read the old testament and struggle with this image of God?

Can we see God’s heart revealed in this passage, in verse 18:

“Let us reason together” – a call to relationship. Back to time of Adam and Eve when they would meet and talk together before they succumbed to temptation.

“Though your sins are like scarlet” – acknowledgement that people have gone their own way. That is what sin is, turning away from God’s way and going our way. Again, this can be traced right back to Adam and Eve.

“They (your sins) shall be white as snow” – isn’t that grace? In the Old Testament written in plain sight, the appearance and promise of grace.

Then what follows? That enormous word – IF. IF you are willing and obedient.

When we read the New Testament, which people are held up as examples as being faithful, obedient and righteous?

Moses – a murderer. A doubter, wanted someone else to speak.

Abraham – a liar. He lied about Sarah being his sister and not his wife. He turned to his own plan to have an heir and had a child with the maid Hagar.

Do we sometimes replace God’s desire for faithfulness as a desire for perfection? That is not a correct replacement.

God knows that each of us will at one time or another – or quite a few times – lose our way. We will take our focus from Him. Just as Moses, just as Abraham, just as Adam and Eve.

We may not have committed murder – but losing our way can be simpler than that. Perhaps we covet what our neighbours have, or have not read our bible every day, or perhaps our prayer time has not been quite up to scratch. Have we praised Jesus for EVERY blessing? Have we given up trusting in Him because we have not had what we asked for? None of us are perfect.

But God offers us grace. If we turn back to trusting in Him, which is the basis upon which willingness and obedience are built, He will continue to offer us His grace.

Just as in the case of Hosea and Isaiah, hope and possible reconciliation between God and His people is always given.

God’s act of grace most prominent to those in the time of Hosea and Isaiah was the exodus – when God rescued His people from oppression. For us today, God’s most prominent act of grace is the cross.

Jesus died for each of us so that we could reconcile with our Father in heaven.

Would a God of punishment, seeking only perfection, be willing to offer such grace? Or is that the grace given by a forgiving God, being faithful to each of us at such a cost?

Often in the bible Jesus is portrayed as a bridegroom with the church as His bride. If you are married, consider your relationship with your spouse. Have you always agreed with each other? How often has your partner annoyed you by doing something that you would not have done? How do we deal with that? Do we give up on them and allow our anger to simmer to boiling? Or do we continue to talk to each other, to look at the alternative viewpoint. We may not always end up agreeing, but we do have an understanding which can eradicate the annoyance or anger.

So it should be with our relationship with Jesus. How do we get to know His viewpoint? By reading the bible, praying and listening. Either to Him speaking to you directly or perhaps through others.

How do we stay faithful? By keeping our focus on Him. We may not always be able to read a whole book of the bible – and sometimes we may not know what to pray, or have a list that will last for hours – but Jesus looks for our desire behind our actions.

In Isaiah God stated that He did not care if people prayed really long prayers – if their attitude behind them was not love-based He was not interested, which is still the case today. A one line prayer rooted in love is better than a two hour listing without any trust or meaning behind the words. Love is the root – just as in marriage.

May we remain faithful to Jesus, by seeking justice, encouraging the oppressed, defending the cause of the fatherless and pleading the case of the widow.

Our faithfulness may not be to leave our homes and wander in the wilderness for years; it may not be to wait until our old age to have a son. We may not even get to see the promise that encourages us to continue – just like Moses who did not get to the promised land, or Abraham who did not see all his descendants.

But our faithfulness can be to continue trusting in God and walking with Him, even when it is counterintuitive in the eyes of the world.

Or in other words, may our faithfulness be seen in our actions as well as our offerings and prayers, despite the discomfort we may experience in living a life pleasing to Jesus – and only Him.