

**“SHELTER FROM THE STORM”**

*Isaiah 25:1-12*

It's more or less a national characteristic, isn't it? It is legendary in other countries. The British find conversation difficult, so we talk about the weather. It's something we all experience in common and we pretty well all agree on it – unlike religion, politics or sport. In fact, if you walk down the street in the pouring rain, with the temperature somewhere around freezing, and someone coming the other way remarks on how sunny and mild it is, it's a pretty safe bet you won't contradict them. And usually any observations we do make about the weather are complaints – it's too cold, too wet, too hot, too dry, too windy, too muggy.

The past couple of weeks have kept most of us in good material about the weather as we have seen on the television news and probably experienced ourselves gales, floods, snow, very cold temperatures and unusually mild temperatures. At least, those of us who stayed in this country for half-term did. And for those of you who forsook these shores and flew off to other climes, when I've asked whether you had a good time, the first sentence has usually been about the weather you experienced there. But despite the rising levels of the Rivers Severn or Wharfe, the twenty-foot snowdrifts in Scotland, the crippling gales in Northern Ireland, our weather is fairly temperate. We have already heard this morning of the extremes of weather which are routinely experienced in other parts of the world, places where the patterns of weather and the weird effects that climate change are having mean frequent misery and lives lived in a constant state of anxiety.

Although we don't experience those literal extremes of weather, though, we appropriate the vocabulary of meteorology to describe our own day to day situations: It never rains but it pours; The winds of change; The storms of life; A storm of abuse; A hail of criticism; Clouds of anxiety; The heat is on; I've been frozen out. We've all used such phrases, haven't we? But they are not peculiar to our own contemporary English culture. In the passage we read earlier from the prophecy of Isaiah, we find that he used such meteorological metaphors as well, particularly in *Isaiah 25:4*, which is where I'd like us to focus our thoughts for a few moments this morning.

These words come in a part of Isaiah's prophecy which has been called by some scholars "*The Apocalypse of Isaiah*". It seems to be looking forward to a time when God's intervention will bring about the destruction of his enemies and the establishment of his Kingdom, and in a way it is very similar to parts of the Apocalypse of St John, which we have in our Bibles as *The Book of Revelation*. The prophet is looking forward in a vision of what will one day come to pass. Those who oppose God and his people will be destroyed, as we read in *24:21-23* and *25:10-12*. And he will provide a great feast and an eternity of joy and peace for those who are his own, from all over the earth (*25:6-8*). It's a wonderful vision, a source, no doubt, of great hope. And it will lead to great rejoicing (*25:9*).

But, as Isaiah makes clear in the opening sentences of this chapter, it is really only what you would expect from a faithful God (*25:1*). His purposes are being fulfilled and his plans, which were conceived long ago, are coming to fruition in this vision. What he has promised, he will carry out. He is a God of perfect faithfulness. The future is assured because of his steadfast love.

But we do not have to wait until the end of time, until the final fulfilment of that Messianic kingdom, in order to begin to experience the benefits. Yes, what the prophet is writing about is in the future, but God is faithful **now**, and we can also draw on our experience – and the experience of God's people in the past – to build up our confidence in him. We can enjoy the protection and the blessing of God here and now. In the words we're focussing on this morning, Isaiah makes reference to "*the poor*" and "*the needy*". If you have a different translation you may well find those words are slightly different, but throughout the Old Testament the Hebrew words they represent are used more or less interchangeably. At the root of the word translated "*poor*" is the idea of wavering, tottering. And the word "*needy*" is based on a root that

means easily bent, and therefore easily exploited. The context here means that these are people who are oppressed and attacked, but the principles behind what the prophet is saying hold out hope to everyone who is feeling worn down and fragile in the face of the problems of life.

As the difficulties and discomforts of life assault us, as we find ourselves slipping from discouragement into depression and despair, so we can come to God and find in him a *refuge*, a *shelter* and a source of *shade*. They are images which occur again and again in the Bible, and particularly in the Old Testament where there are so many instances of God's people – collectively and individually – being attacked and hounded by their enemies. The *Psalms* are especially rich in this imagery, with the idea of God as “*our strength and refuge*” (*Psalms 46:1*) running through many of those songs.

But it's still the same God that we worship. He is still faithful and loving. He still keeps his promises. So we too can find refuge in him, hide ourselves in him. When the storms of life batter us, he is there for us. On those occasions when we feel the sharp sting of criticism flying into us like hail: when we feel battered down by discouragement: when we are buffeted about by uncertainty, like a sapling blown this way and that in the wind: when one problem after another pours over us like a torrent of rain – that's when God shelters and protects us.

When I used to go and watch Southampton play at the old Dell, with proper terraces where you stood to watch the game, we used to go up in the “Chocolate Box”, a small section of terracing that was up above the main supporters end. Standing in there we were above the level of the wall very often and the wind and rain used to whip up off the Solent into our backs. So we all wanted to stand in front of Steve, a rather large youth both in height and width, whose bulky body promised pretty good protection from the elements. (In fact, we wanted to stand in front of him and next to his sister.) On those occasions when we are really going through it, God stands between us and the problem, protecting us and shielding us from the full force of it all.

I can't recall the sun ever shining on the Dell – I'm sure it did, but if you're a Southampton supporter, it only ever seems to rain on you (except, of course, on that beautiful sunny afternoon at Wembley when the Saints trounced Manchester United to win the FA Cup). If it had shone at the Dell, though, we might well have found Steve to be a source of shade as well! But when the heat is on, when there's just too much pressure at work: when the stress levels are rising: when the difficulties that assault us just seem so relentless: when you are wilting under the power of the opposition, then God provides the shade, helps us to keep cool. He can bring the temperature down and give us breathing space if we are prepared to trust in him and leave the worrying to him. As Peter writes in his first letter, “*Cast all your cares on him for he cares for you*” (*1 Peter 5:7*).

You see, with the vision that we have here of what God can do, our faith and our hope can provide strength and protection for the present. We have this great promise to look forward to, this wonderful kingdom that we will be a part of. That in itself can stimulate us and encourage us in our lives day by day. But the point of what we have here is not just that there's this perfect scenario awaiting us – after all, that would entail a great deal of faith and trust – but we can see how faithful God is by what he has already done. He has already proved himself to be a shelter and a refuge for those whose own resources are running very low, for those who are almost destroyed by the storms of life. There are testimonies galore – both in the Bible itself and in history – of those who can bear witness to the protection of God. Not only that, but there are examples in your own life of the occasions when God has helped you, when he has taken the heat off, when he has protected you from the buffeting of the forces of evil.

And, of course, we see what God has already done in Jesus Christ. Jesus hung there on the cross of Calvary to make sure that humanity knew that God was in earnest when he made his promises. He hung there in the storm as the sun disappeared and the sky grew black, as the earth quaked and the graves split open. Jesus hung there in the midst of that storm, and at the focus of the storm of evil that was unleashed

that day, in order that we might find a refuge in our own storms. He stared into the wind, he felt the heat, he experienced the lot – so that we would never have to.

And in the calm of Easter Sunday morning he walked through death and out the other side, through the whirlwind into the calm, to show that however hard the forces of evil might rage, those who identify themselves with him can never be beaten down. This is the one of whom it was said, “*even the winds and waves obey him*”. There is nothing that can stand against Jesus, and as we put our faith in him, as we enter the shelter he provides, we too can be sure that nothing will ever fully defeat us, nothing will ever separate us from his love.

The key, of course, is trust. If you’re looking for shelter in a storm, you have to trust that the hut, the outcrop, the snow hole will protect you. If you have doubts and refuse to take shelter you will find yourself exposed and possibly injured or destroyed. In the next chapter, still part of this same section, Isaiah writes that the one who knows peace is the one who trusts in God (26:3). Sometimes that trusting can seem very hard, very difficult to do – but there is no alternative, no other place to turn, “*no other name under heaven given to men by which we must be saved*” (Acts 4:12). Others may have promised. Other philosophies and therapies may claim to have the answers. There may appear to be strategies to enable you to manage your way out of difficulty, but in the end, when the crunch comes, “*the LORD, the LORD, is the rock eternal*” (Isaiah 26:4).

What are the storms of life that you are experiencing at the moment? Where’s the heat coming from? Are you feeling discouraged, depressed, in despair? Are you wilting under the relentlessness of the pressure? Trust in God. He’ll be there for you. Just as putting up an umbrella when it’s raining protects you from the rain but doesn’t make the rain go away, God can protect you from the consequences of your situation even though the problems causing you stress don’t seem to go away. Believe in Jesus. Accept what he has done for you – and look to the future with renewed confidence. If you are able to proclaim with Isaiah, “*O LORD, you are my God*” then you will also be able to say “*I will exalt and praise your name, for in perfect faithfulness you have done marvellous things*” (25:1). He’s the only shelter from the storm.