

“LIVING LIFE AS A WHOLE”
Isaiah 55:1-13, Colossians 1:20

Why is life the way it is? Looking back over the past year, I'm sure we have all experienced incidents and situations that have left us feeling battered and bruised. And many of us probably have anxieties about the year ahead, often based on bad experiences in the past. Many people, even in a prosperous and thriving democracy such as ours, feel a deep sense of dissatisfaction, an awareness that all is not as it should be, a lack of fulfilment. And on the local, national and international scene there are all kinds of things happening which make us start to think that life is not really all that it could be.

Such feelings are often described using the metaphor of hunger or thirst. As Bruce Springsteen sang with his usual passion, *“Everybody's got a hungry heart”*. It's as though we have an unsatisfied appetite much of the time – and we can't always put our finger on what's causing it, nor can we fully acknowledge it. The American novelist and theologian Frederick Buechner puts it like this:

“In a sense we are all hungry and in need, but most of us don't recognise it. With plenty to eat in the deep freeze, with a roof over our heads and a car in the garage, we assume that the empty feeling inside must be just a case of the blues that can be cured by a Florida vacation, a new TV, an extra drink before supper.”

The passage we've just read from the Old Testament prophecy of Isaiah begins with a call to people who feel like that. It was originally delivered to people who were feeling the effects of exile, of being deported *en masse* from their native land to another country. There were issues of real hunger, real thirst, but it's clear from the passage itself and from the chapters that precede and follow it, that Isaiah is dealing with the deeper hunger, the spiritual hunger and thirst that his listeners were experiencing. And he effectively goes out into the market place and offers this invitation. In the old *King James' Version*, the opening word is *“Ho!”* – a better translation than the *“Come”* of the *NIV*. In Hebrew it was a word very much like the *“Oyez!”* that we hear our Town Crier shout when he wants to get people's attention out in the streets of Lichfield.

And once he's got their attention, he addresses those who have unmet needs, unfulfilling work and lives, spiritual emptiness. Basically, it's all those who suffer from what André Malraux famously summed up as *“La Condition Humaine”*, the Human Condition. In other words, it's something that, at some time or other, affects us all in some way. It's part of our basic humanity and the Bible explains it through the story of the Fall in *Genesis 3*. The idyllic paradise that was represented by the Garden of Eden, and the close relationship that humankind had with God their Creator was distorted, perverted by the presence of evil and the willingness of men and women to allow it room in their lives. So the sin (to use the biblical word) of Adam and Eve led to a situation in which satisfaction and fulfilment drained out of life and creation itself was spoiled (*Genesis 3:17*).

Ever since then, men and women have been trying to come to terms with the situation and to do something to improve it. In a sense we are all involved in that. But politics (which is what it is) – whether local, national or international – is really only an attempt to help people accommodate themselves to it. There's nothing wrong with that, and those of you here this morning who are involved in the life of this community by trying to improve things for the rest of us deserve our gratitude and respect. But we also need to go deeper than that and this passage is rather disturbing in some ways, because it forces us to face up to the reality of our situation. Maybe it's even more disturbing for us in a relatively prosperous and “successful” place like Lichfield. This is Frederick Buechner again (writing on a different subject):

“The trouble with being rich is that since you can solve with your checkbook virtually all the practical problems that bedevil ordinary people, you are left in your leisure with nothing but the great human problems to contend with: how to be happy, how to love and be loved, how to find meaning and purpose in your life. In desperation the rich and continually tempted to believe that they can solve those problems too with their checkbooks.”

But we can't. And these words shake us out of that comfortable attitude whereby we think everything will be OK if we just keep doing what we're doing, but do it better or with more resources. Suddenly that old dissatisfaction raises its ugly head again. Geoffrey Grogan, an Old Testament scholar, writes: "*The prophet does not plead or argue, but throws into the quiet pool of their complacency a disturbing pebble, as he asks, 'Does this really satisfy you? Is this what you are for?'*" Jesus told his followers that he had come to bring them "*life in all its fullness*", to enable them to live life to the full. And that's what's being offered here by this town-crier prophet who unsettles his listeners before offering them God's solution.

And the solution which God offers is the best. It is of a different order from what they were expecting. The initial invitation was to those who were thirsty and the expected solution was the offer of water to buy. (The water seller was as familiar a sight in the Ancient Near East as the supermarket bottled brands are today.) But the offer is not water – it is milk and wine, nourishment and pleasure. And it is not for sale, it is free. This is an invitation which takes us beyond simply dealing with the symptoms to enjoying something of a different kind altogether.

But the invitation is an urgent one. Just as the Town Crier calls out the messages that cannot wait until everyone has read the posters or gossiped the news from house to house, so the prophet here says "*Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.*" There is a way out of this abandonment to the human condition, there is a way to discover a more satisfying and fulfilling life, but you need to grab it while you can. And the way out is provided by God's grace.

In v7 there is an invitation to everyone – "*wicked*" is the prophet's way of describing the human condition – to "*turn to the LORD*" and accept his offer of free pardon, of liberty from the things that make life so difficult. It is free and without conditions. God will turn our lives around if we want him to. Now for Isaiah's first listeners and for us today that seems amazing, too good to be true. Why on earth should he do it? We have to say that we don't know. Even the prophet himself admits that in vv8,9.

These two verses are often used as a rather trite answer to those who question why God allows tragedies to happen and seems to let suffering affect our lives. But in this, their original context, they are a way of saying that we just cannot understand the amazing grace of God. Many people maintain that they could never follow the Christian way because there are too many unanswered questions. To the person who has been through an education based entirely on a model of rational enquiry based on the thinking of the Enlightenment, this just does not add up. If we are to believe anything we have to examine it rationally and if there is no obvious rational explanation, then it is to be discarded. But St Augustine summed up his own Christian commitment like this: "*Understanding is the reward of faith. Therefore, seek not to understand that you may believe, but rather believe that you may understand.*" In words that may be more familiar to us, John Newton wrote in his great hymn *Amazing grace!*, "*How precious did that grace appear the hour I first believed.*" We may not understand it, but we can still receive it.

And the agent of that grace, the one who has now made possible the fulfilment of all that Isaiah said, is Jesus Christ. We read from Paul's letter to the Colossians earlier on and in the last couple of sentences Paul tells us that it was what Jesus did on the cross that made possible reconciliation and renewal for all creation (*Colossians 1:20*). It is through him, through what he has done and through our belief in him, that we can have a sense of hope for a new, restored creation in which all who respond will have a part to play.

Now you don't need me to point out to you that that new creation, that new Kingdom (to use Jesus' own terminology) is not yet in place. We still see the effects of evil wherever we look – on the TV news, on the radio, in the newspapers, first hand in the streets of this and any other city in the world. We can still observe with our own eyes the ways in which the human condition spoils what should have been so good. We can still experience in our own selves the deep sense of dissatisfaction and lack of fulfilment that is the legacy of humanity's capitulation to selfishness. But that doesn't mean we give up hope.

Indeed, Jesus has not only offered us hope, but shown us what things might be like. The Hebrew prophets such as Isaiah, Jeremiah, Micah and Amos looked forward to what the Kingdom might look like. We have in these words a brief but vivid attempt to describe what might happen (vv12, 13). Elsewhere we read of the effect on human beings (*Isaiah 61:1-3*). But they were, in a sense, inspired visions of the future Kingdom of God. Jesus actually showed us what it could be like – he offered glimpses of this new Kingdom. As he wandered around first-century Palestine, he healed those who suffered, drew in the marginalised, confronted the demons which plague people, challenged the vested interests of the power brokers, shared his divine love and compassion with all whom he met.

And still today his followers are called to offer glimpses of that Kingdom life in their own lives – by their acting with Christ-like compassion, by their sharing of his love, by their stand against the powers of evil. We certainly don't always get it right – we are only ever the palest of reflections of Jesus himself – but there is no doubt that what Isaiah points us towards and what God offers us in Jesus is something that is way, way beyond our expectations and aspirations. Those of us who have tried hard to come to some accommodation with the human condition, who think that's the best we're ever going to be able to manage, who seem to be pretty successful in the eyes of our society, need to realise that there is much more beyond that, much more that is of an entirely different order.

Malcolm Muggeridge was a great writer, journalist and thinker. He was editor of *Punch* during its heyday and a confidant of politicians and artists around the world. This is what he wrote towards the end of his long and, many would say, successful life:

“I may, I suppose, regard myself or pass for being a relatively successful man. People occasionally stare at me in the streets, that's fame. I can fairly easily earn enough for admission to the higher slopes of the Inland Revenue, that's success. Furnished with money and a little fame, even the elderly, if they care to, may partake of trendy diversions, that's pleasure. It might happen once in a while that something I said or wrote was sufficiently heeded for me to persuade myself that it represented a serious impact on our times, that's fulfilment. Yet I say to you, and I beg you to believe me, multiply these tiny triumphs by a million, add them all together and they are nothing, less than nothing, a positive impediment, measured against one draught of that living water Christ offers to the spiritually thirsty, irrespective of who or what they are.”

The invitation Isaiah gave to his compatriots many centuries ago is no less urgent today – indeed, as time passes it becomes ever more urgent – and you are hearing it again this morning. *“Seek the LORD while he may be found, call on him while he is near... Turn to the LORD... for he will freely pardon.”* If you are interested or curious or desperate, have a word with me afterwards.

(Housegroup notes and discussion material follow on next page)

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Why is life the way it is? Wherever we look there is evidence of problems and difficulties – and each of us experiences things that we find difficult to cope with. We feel that life is not all that it should be. Often (and particularly in the Bible) such feelings are described using the metaphor of hunger or thirst. We all have an unsatisfied appetite much of the time – even those who seem to have everything. This passage from Isaiah's prophecy begins with a call to all who are feeling dissatisfied and unfulfilled.

The root cause is "the human condition", something that is common to us all and which is a part of our shared humanity. The root of such a malaise is the Fall, the effect of sin and evil on our world and in our lives (see *Genesis 3*). We may try to accommodate ourselves to it (which is what politics is really all about), or we may try to find a deeper solution. *Isaiah 55* shakes us out of any complacency we might have about dealing with it.

God offers a solution to the human condition – and it is the best: not just water for the thirsty to buy, but milk and wine for all to receive free. Those who call on God "*while he is near*" are able to receive this gift. It is a gift of God's grace – freely given and difficult for us to understand. But *vv8,9* remind us that God thinks in a way which is quite different from ours. St Augustine said, "*Seek not to understand that you may believe, but believe that you may understand.*"

The agent of this grace is Jesus Christ, who through his death on the cross has made possible the renewal and reconciliation of all creation. In his own life he showed glimpses of what this new creation or new Kingdom might be like. Those who follow him today, although pale reflections of Jesus himself, are still called to offer glimpses of the Kingdom to a hurting and hungry world.

The invitation to receive from the grace of God is still urgent today and we are given the opportunity to come to God and experience the fulfilment that Jesus came to bring (*John 10:10*). As his followers, we should also be making known the good news of what he offers.

Questions for discussion

1. What form does this "thirst" take in people's lives today? How have you experienced it?
2. "Politics is really only an attempt to help people accommodate themselves to [the human condition]." To what extent do you think this is true? What do the followers of Jesus Christ have that they can add to this?
3. Why is the invitation of Isaiah (*vv6,7*) so urgent? Is there any urgency in our evangelism? Why/why not?
4. Do you find *vv8,9* helpful or are they really just a cop out for things we can't explain? Why?
5. In what ways can we "offer glimpses of the Kingdom" in our personal lives? as a church?
6. Is there anything that has struck you about this passage that you hadn't noticed before?