

“DON’T DWELL ON THE PAST”

Isaiah 43:16-25

Lichfield is a great place to live, despite what the regular writers of letters to *The Mercury* might have us believe. I often wonder why they choose to live here, if they have so many complaints about the place – but that’s another story. It’s a great place for all sorts of reasons, but amongst them is the city’s history, which is apparent at every turn, and its great sense of tradition. We’re delighted to have the Sherriff with us this morning – one of only a handful left in the country. We have a Town Crier as well, and annual events such as St George’s Court, Bower Day and the Court of Array, all of which add something to the pleasure of living here.

Unfortunately, people complain loud and long when things change. New houses, new shops, different ways of doing things, initiatives by the Council or the business community are deemed to threaten the heritage and the comfort of what we know and love. There’s a hint of nostalgia in it all, and possibly a sense of fear of the unknown. It’s into a situation such as that that the prophet Isaiah was speaking in the words that Chris has just read for us from *Isaiah 43*. In the middle of a much longer section about the attitude of God’s people to his activity in their national and spiritual life Isaiah has something to say about their attitude to the past. And there are a couple of lessons in that which we can still take to heart today – two ways of dealing with the past that we need to hear.

When we look back into our own past, or further back into the past of our community or nation, there are two different responses to what we see, and they both affect all of us to some extent. And, as I’m sure you know, what has happened in the past affects the present in all kinds of ways. Then the way we deal with that has a powerful bearing on the future. Some of us put more emphasis on one response, some of us on the other, but all of us – if we stop for a moment and reflect on it – will find our view of the past is tinged with a mixture of nostalgia and regret. Let me explain what I mean by that and try to relate it to what God was saying through Isaiah.

Nostalgia is a very powerful force in our lives these days – although, of course, it’s not what it used to be. It’s maybe a more potent force than it was a couple of generations ago because there is so much to feed it. Life in the twentieth century was captured on film and in photographs in a way that wasn’t possible before that. So we can constantly be looking back at events and episodes in our own personal lives and in the life of our community or nation, re-living those events and immersing ourselves in memories in a way that those who had to rely only on word of mouth or the printed page could not. Television is awash with such stuff: there entire channels devoted to it and frequent programmes looking back at the events, the music, the fashions of previous decades.

Then we start to see the past through the lenses of our own preferences. We think what a great time we had in the 1970s, celebrating the colour, the fashion, the music – and forgetting the inflation, the industrial strife, the international conflicts and so on. A bit further back people will say what a great time they had during the Blitz, when everyone was comradely and we all helped each other, forgetting that the kids were living with strangers a couple of hundred miles away and most of the street had disappeared in bombing raids. We think how wonderful it used to be when everyone left their doors unlocked when they went on holiday (although I’ve never ever met anyone who did) and things were so much safer (although crime against children was statistically much higher than today and violent disorder was a problem on a weekly basis). But it all means that we have trouble coming to terms with what’s happening now and we seek our security in a mythical past rather than dealing with the exciting possibilities of the future.

So God says through Isaiah, “*Forget the former things; do not dwell on the past*”. Now there’s a certain amount of Hebrew hyperbole here. Clearly the people of Israel were not to forget the past completely: a great deal of this book of Isaiah – and much of the rest of the Old Testament – is taken up with reminders of the history of God’s people, and specifically the ways in which it demonstrated God’s love for and protection over them. They needed to rehearse those deeds, and the Jewish people still do in their regular

liturgies and annual feasts. But, whilst they acknowledge that and give thanks for it, they are not to “*dwell on the past*”. Some translations phrase that as “*cling to the past*”.

What he’s saying is: give thanks for the past, but don’t go on trying to live in it. That’s gone. It is, as one author put it, “*another country to which we can never return*”. It’s the “*blue-remembered hills*” of Houseman’s *Shropshire Lad*. Remember what happened to Lot’s wife as she left the condemned city of Sodom – as she looked back, she was turned into a pillar of salt. And the Israelites hadn’t been long out of Egypt on their journey to a new land when they started wanted to go back to Egypt because they missed the cucumber and garlic (*Numbers 11:5* – Never mind the slavery and the oppression: give us some hummus!) As we’ve seen, nostalgia can play tricks on us and we have to move on. The people of Israel had to face up to the fact that God was preparing to do new things amongst them (v19) and he gives Isaiah a vision of what he has in mind in the following verses. The past might seem very pleasant to look at from the viewpoint of the present, but there are even better things in store, a better world, an alternative to the problems of the present.

The people to whom Isaiah was speaking were struggling with all kinds of crises in their national and religious life. Things were happening that they found difficult to cope with. There were threats from neighbouring countries and it was difficult for them to see quite what God was allowing to happen to them and why. This was a bewildering period for God’s people and they wanted to retreat into the safety and security (as they saw it) of a kind of golden age when it seemed as if everything went perfectly. It didn’t, of course, but that’s the problem with nostalgia.

So God says that they are not to retreat into that rose-tinted scrapbook of past memories, but to trust him for a bright and exciting future. We won’t go into all the history this morning, but the fortunes of God’s people were about to change dramatically bringing a lot of grief in the short term but leading to a much more secure future in the relatively mid-term, and (as we see when we read on through the book) in the longer term a Messiah and eventually a renewed creation. God is the one with the best overview of history, so he is the one to trust.

And that goes for us as well. In church life, in community life, in national life the temptation is always to try and take refuge in the past, but it won’t work. We can’t just cherry-pick the good bits that the experts tell us we should hang on to – because even the experts can’t agree. We need to trust God to lead us forward according to his standards of justice and righteousness. We need to listen for his voice, acknowledge his leading, pray for his help. That’s why we pray for God’s help for us as a church but also why we pray regularly for the leaders of this community – councillors and officers alike – and of our nation. And why we must be open to the new things that God brings our way.

But there are also some people who don’t actually escape into the past for their own security: they find themselves trapped by it. I’ve just been reading a novel by Robert Goddard called *Found Wanting*. It’s one of those books you have to read in big chunks because there are so many characters (in this novel all with very similar Scandinavian names) and so many totally incredible plot twists that you’d lose your way if you didn’t. Anyway, the subtitle is “*The past will never let you go ...*” And some of us are like that. We’d like to enjoy the present and look forward to the future, but the regrets of our past have got us well and truly shackled.

Just as all of us wallow in the warm and comforting waters of nostalgia to a greater or lesser extent, so all of us carry some regrets about the past – wrong decisions, mistaken choices, missed opportunities. Before the novel I just mentioned I was reading Andrew Rawnsley’s two volumes about New Labour and particularly in the second of those, *The End Of The Party*, which deals with Gordon Brown’s time as Prime Minister, there is a catalogue of missed chances and wrong choices that you can see with the benefit of hindsight would have made huge differences both to the government and to the nation (for better or worse depending on your point of view).

Isaiah here catalogues some of the ways in which God's people have messed things up (vv22-24), but they are by no means alone in all that. According to St Paul, we are all affected by this very human propensity to make the wrong choices about our lives. More often than not we make those choices despite the clear instructions that are given by God in the Bible. Isaiah, Paul and all the other biblical writers call those wrong choice, made against the will of God, "sins" (and, in this passage, its synonym, "transgressions"). That's not a word we like. It smacks of old-fashioned Bible-bashing, of a world of stark choices and moral absolutes that we today find uncomfortable. But, unfortunately, there's no getting away from it in this passage this morning.

For all of us, as I've said, this is a problem. St Paul writes in *Romans 3:23* that "*All have sinned and fallen short of the glory of God*". It wouldn't take a very long pause for any of us to think of something we have said, thought or done in the last week – in the last few hours, even – that was wrong, that we regret, that leaves us with a nagging feeling of guilt. And for many of us there are things in the past which we acknowledge were out of order, but which now come back to haunt us. I'm not talking about the actual physical consequences of those sins, but the sense that this is something we can never escape. And we end up being hostages to the past. The memory cripples our freedom to act now. We find our sense of self-worth diminished (that's partly what "*falling short of the glory of God*" can mean). We fear the future because of what has happened in the past. And however much we might try to dispel that sense of regret, of guilt, however much we might try and justify our decision, however much we might try to convince ourselves that it doesn't matter, it keeps coming back.

Once again, though, God offers advice through the prophet Isaiah. Having told his people not to " *dwell on the past*", he leads the way by example and at the end of the short section we heard this morning, God says, "*I, even I, am he who blots out your transgressions for my sake, and remembers your sins no more*". That's astonishingly good news! God will consign our sins to the dustbin so that they never again affect us. And something I noticed only this week as I was preparing this is that God says he will do it "*for his own sake*". God will forgive and forget because he wants to – not because we force him to or bargain with him or blackmail him, but because he wants to. God wants his glory in us, the glory of his own image which he stamped on is at creation, to be made obvious once again.

Why does he do that? Well, the Bible tells us on pretty well every page somehow or other, that God loves us. He doesn't want us to be constantly in thrall to the sins of the past. He wants us to live in the freedom of the present with a tangible hope for the future.

How does he do that? That's what much of the rest of this book of *Isaiah* is all about – indeed, it's what most of the rest of the Bible is about. We've already said that God's plans for the future involved the arrival of the Messiah, the arrival that we have just finished celebrating. Jesus came into our world and, having demonstrated in his own life and through his own teaching that God's way is the best, then died on the cross to make it possible for us to follow that way and to put behind us for once and for all the times when we chose not to follow that way. Effectively, he provided a totally new start for humanity and offers each of us personally a new start in our own lives.

For some of us, perhaps, that is the "*new thing*" that God promises us this morning. Enjoy the good things from the past. Look back with gratitude to the things that have been helpful and hopeful about the past. But don't "*cling*" to it, don't "*dwell on*" it, and don't allow it to take you prisoner. Offer up to God those things that you want him to deal with – ask for his forgiveness and for the help of his Holy Spirit to accept that forgiveness – and then trust him that he "*remembers them no more*". If God doesn't cling to the past, then nor should we.

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The people to whom Isaiah was speaking were struggling with all kinds of crises in their national and religious life. Things were happening that they found difficult to cope with. This was a bewildering period for God's people and they wanted to retreat into the safety and security (as they saw it) of a kind of golden age when it seemed as if everything went perfectly.

So God says that they are to trust him for a bright and exciting future. And that goes for us as well. We need to trust God to lead us forward according to his standards of justice and righteousness. We need to listen for his voice, acknowledge his leading, pray for his help. And we must be open to the new things that God brings our way.

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Questions for discussion

1. Isaiah says "*Forget the former things*". Can we really do that? Should we do that?
2. In what ways do we unhelpfully "*dwell on the past*"? How can we prevent that happening?
3. God says that he is "*doing a new thing*". Should we always be looking for new things (from God or elsewhere)? Why/why not?
4. What do you think God means when he says that he will blot out our transgressions "*for his own sake*"?
5. Why do you think we find ourselves dwelling on past sins and we're not able fully to accept God's forgiveness? What can we do about it?

6. Spend some time in prayer thanking God for the good things about your past and asking him to deal with your regrets and sins.