

“A PLACE OF WELCOME”

Isaiah 56:1-8

As some of you will already be aware, especially if you were at the last Church Meeting, we've been rediscovering and refocussing our church vision. You'll have seen copies of it on the walls of the rooms in these buildings and it's usually printed on the weekly notice sheet and in the church magazine. The one-line summary of it is that we want to be *“a church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church”*. At our Elders' Awayday in the autumn and at the Church Meeting, as I've said, we spent a bit of time thinking about it and praying around it.

For those of you who weren't around at the time – and for those who may have forgotten – our main mission statement was forged quite some years ago, and then it was renewed at the time when we were thinking of redeveloping these buildings in order to serve our community better. Tina Cadwallader, who was working with YWAM in Chile at the time, got in touch to say that she felt God wanted us to look closely at *Isaiah 54*. She wasn't sure why, nor which particular part of it, but she was obeying God in passing it on. We looked closely at that chapter and prayed about it for a while, then focussed in on v2. If you've got your Bible open from the reading, flick back over the page and you'll see there that we felt we were being encouraged to enlarge our base – from which came the development – and *“lengthen the cords and strengthen the stakes”*, which we took to be about really consolidating our discipleship – which is what we've been trying to do ever since. And right in the middle of that verse was the phrase, *“Do not hold back”*. We are to go all out for God.

If you look at the section of which *chapter 54* is a part, you'll see that it's all to do with looking forward to the fulfilment of God's promises, the establishing of his Kingdom, his just rule over all things. That was begun, really, with the coming of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah, of whom we read in our series on Matthew's Gospel last year. Jesus' life, death, resurrection and glorification kicked off the spread of this Kingdom which will eventually be consummated at his return, when God finally puts everything to rights again. And a couple of weeks ago we looked at part of *Isaiah 55*, the next chapter, in which the invitation is thrown out to everyone to be part of this renewed, restored Kingdom of God. This Kingdom will be the place of God's complete sovereignty, a place of fulfilment and joy for all creation. It won't simply be a nice place for our disembodied souls to spend eternity, nor a collection of clouds for us to sit on playing harps – the popular and misleading conception many people have of the afterlife. Remember that in *Genesis 3*, all creation was to be affected by the sin that had affected God's good creation through the disobedience of Adam and Eve.

To Adam he said, “Because you listened to your wife and ate fruit from the tree about which I commanded you, ‘You must not eat from it,’

*“Cursed is the ground because of you;
through painful toil you will eat food from it all the days of your life.*

*It will produce thorns and thistles for you,
and you will eat the plants of the field.”*

And in *Romans 8:19-22*, St Paul tells us that all creation is still waiting for the arrival of God's restoration.

For the creation waits in eager expectation for the children of God to be revealed. For the creation was subjected to frustration, not by its own choice, but by the will of the one who subjected it, in hope that the creation itself will be liberated from its bondage to decay and brought into the freedom and glory of the children of God. We know that the whole creation has been groaning as in the pains of childbirth right up to the present time.

And then the next chapter continues this thread. The words we read from *Isaiah 56* are where we felt our thoughts were being directed as we talked and prayed about this at the Elders' Awayday. The beginning of this chapter is a call to God's people to get into action, to start to live out this vision of the Kingdom of God. We've talked about this as giving people glimpses of the Kingdom, haven't we? We are not called to build the Kingdom. We cannot build the Kingdom. That is God's work. But he has given us the privilege of being part of that process by reflecting something of what it's all about in our lives day by day. The very first verse sums up what that's all about:

*This is what the Lord says:
“Maintain justice
and do what is right,
for my salvation is close at hand
and my righteousness will soon be revealed.*

Get on and live out the values of the Kingdom, because God is actually in the process of sporting it out. *The Message* translation puts it like this:

*God's Message:
“Guard my common good:
Do what's right and do it in the right way,
For salvation is just around the corner,
my setting-things-right is about to go into action.*

Those are words of great encouragement and inspiration, and we're going to look at that verse next week and see how it fits in with our work and witness within the community.

But the prophet Isaiah goes on to tell us that those who commit to God will be especially blessed: those who take all this seriously will have a share in the Kingdom of God. He particularly mentions those who “*keep the Sabbath without desecrating it*”. The keeping of a Sabbath was always the marker of God's people and it is still reckoned to be of paramount importance by observant Jews. It is a way of showing that you want to organise your life according to God's ways, in line with what he tells us is best for us as his much-loved creation. Demonstrate that you are wanting to follow God's ways in this distinctive

pattern of behaviour and, as the rest of the verse goes on, do your best to avoid any kind of evil – “*do what is right*”.

Then – and this is the thing which would have been very surprising to Isaiah’s first listeners, the Jewish people who considered themselves to be God’s unique chosen ones – then everyone who wants to will be able to share in this Kingdom. Those who take all this seriously, who want to commit themselves to God’s ways, whether Jew or Gentiles, will be able to experience the full blessing of God. And what is even more surprising is that this will include even those who have previously been excluded for one reason or another – not simply because they are Gentiles. Everyone will be welcomed by God. So who are we, then, to try and exclude anyone from the company of God’s people? God wants everyone to come to him, so why do we think we can erect barriers to those who we don’t think are quite right for the Kingdom? We need to be a place of welcome for everyone.

And Isaiah mentions two group of people in particular, people who have often had a raw deal from some in the church in the past. And they had had a very raw deal within the Jewish people, too. In fact, they had been specifically excluded from the worship of the people of God in Moses’ law as recorded in *Deuteronomy 23:1ff*. These people – foreigners and eunuchs – were not able to enjoy the privileges and blessings of the rest of God’s people when it came to worship: they were physically excluded, kept outside the place of worship. Now, though, they are to be welcomed. As God reorders things to bring them back to what he originally wanted and intended, these people will be part of his Kingdom. Let’s reflect on what that’s all about.

1. **FOREIGNERS**

This is about those who Gentiles and who are outside the family of Israel. God was wanting to use Israel to be the light for the nations round them. He wanted to bless other peoples through them. The Old Testament is full of references to that. So Israel needed to be kept pure and holy – hence all their laws and all the special treatment they seem to get from God. Sadly, that didn’t work out as God intended so God sent Jesus, the archetype of his chosen people, to be that light. You may recall that Simeon greeted Jesus as a light for the Gentiles when he first saw him in the Temple. Now all peoples are equal as far as being able to enjoy God’s salvation, God’s Kingdom blessings, is concerned. That’s what Paul is talking about in *Galatians 3*.

Now, clearly, the foreigners mentioned by Isaiah are a different kind of foreigner from what we would think of today, but the very obvious thrust is that we should welcome the alien and the stranger among us.

We are to welcome those of other races, religions and cultures who want to get closer to God, who want to discover with us the benefits and blessings of God's Kingdom. We need to encourage them to worship with us and to find out more about Jesus and what he has done for them.

There are all kinds of arguments against racism and exclusivism which can be marshalled from the Bible, but this is at the heart of it all. No-one can be excluded from the company of God's people, from worshipping him because of their national background. They are all God's children and they are all objects of the love of Jesus: he died for us all. They are all intended to be recipients of God's grace and blessing. That is a message that needs to be heard loud and clear in a world that is becoming more fragmented and more frightened of other people day by day. So if God wants to welcome foreigners, where is that to be most obviously expressed? In his Church, of course. That is a glimpse of the Kingdom of God that we can give as we extend a welcome to those who come here from other places, for all kinds of reasons.

2. EUNUCHS

The second group of people may seem a very odd group to highlight here – and, indeed, to exclude from worship in the first place (*Deuteronomy 23*). What's this all about, then? Well, as always, ask three Bible scholars and you'll get four answers! But all the suggestions about why these people were first excluded and then welcomed back have something to say to us today – and it's the underlying principle which is the main thing, as I hope we shall see.

Eunuchs, as I'm sure we all know – but just to save any misunderstanding and to spare anyone's blushes if they didn't know and are afraid to ask – eunuchs are men who have no testicles. There could be various reasons for that in the ancient world, some of which are still valid reasons today.

- They may simply have been born like it. It's an abnormality that is rare but certainly not unknown.
- They may have been unwillingly castrated – the result of a fight, of a war wound, of torture, even of punishment. Today it may have been part of some fairly radical treatment for cancer or similar.
- They may have been castrated as part of the requirement for an office. In the Ancient world, the officials in some nations were castrated. Some scholars believe that Daniel and his friends were made eunuchs as part of their qualification to be officials in Babylon. Men who looked after the rulers' harems were eunuchs so that they didn't get up to anything they shouldn't while looking after the rulers' wives and concubines.

- Linked to that, they may have been castrated as part of a ritual, almost certainly linked to idolatry. It was a kind of expression of self-sacrifice in the service of a god. (Origen, a leader in the Early Church, misguidedly castrated himself so that he wouldn't yield to the temptation of sexual sin.)

Each of those reasons for the physical abnormality would lead to some sense of being dislocated from the people of God and therefore might provide a justification for exclusion from worship. But God is now able to overcome that through Jesus. They are no longer acceptable reasons for not being welcome among God's people. Some people think that this is a reference to disability, to people who were at one time seen as being spoilt or blemished in some way by the gatekeepers of religion. I don't think there is anyone now who would even contemplate seeing that as a reason for not welcoming someone into church. But we do still – perhaps unthinkingly – put up a lot of barriers that can make a person with a disability feel unwelcome: difficulties hearing or seeing what's going on, access issues, insensitive questions or comments – all kinds of things. That doesn't help people to feel welcome.

One of the issues that was particularly significant for the Jewish people, for whom inheritance and family name were such powerful ideas, was that the eunuch could clearly not continue his family name. He would have no children to keep the line going. Interestingly, that is the one thing that is covered by this chapter here. Look at v5 – God will remember them and ensure that their name lives on, in a way that will be even better than having had a family! Those considerations can be much less important today, but we must always be careful never to treat those who do not have family – for whatever reason – differently from those who. And those for whom that is an issue – those who want children but currently are struggling – need special sensitivity and a particular welcome.

Then there are those who are idolaters, those whose worship of the One True God is tainted with worship of other gods. The Law of Moses is very clear that such syncretism, such attempts at mixing up the worship of other gods with keeping to God's ways, is an absolute no-no. Sadly, we do find quite a welcome for those who want to be part of the church but are still very much in thrall to the gods of consumerism, fashion, self-centredness, greed, gluttony, gossip and all the rest – not only welcome, but also places of privilege. Of course, all should be welcomed, but, as we shall see, there needs to be an intention to commit to God and to allow his transforming work to take place.

And then, of course, there is the issue of what I called being “sexually distinct”. We're thinking here of those who are affected by gender dysphoria – a perceived confusion about whether they are male, female or something else – or who find themselves sexually attracted to people of the same sex – those who, like the eunuchs, don't conform to the sexual or gender stereotypes with which we have become accustomed. They, too, are to be welcomed and loved, just as God loves them. No-one is to be excluded from the

opportunities which are inherent in the Kingdom of God. Jesus died for everyone, whatever their background, whatever their physical, mental, emotional, intellectual state: so, as his followers, we have no business whatsoever depriving anyone of the chance of responding to that.

You see, what Isaiah is talking about here are two groups of people – foreigners and eunuchs – who are unable to change what they are. Whether they are racially, ethnically distinct from us or physically, sexually distinct from us, that is what they are and we can claim no superiority over them nor exclude them from what we enjoy, from the blessings which God has for them. But God can work in their lives, just as he can work and has worked in ours. We are to welcome everyone who genuinely wants to know about God and to be part of his people.

And, as we have said, that is a reflection of the love which God has for all people, a love which was supremely demonstrated by the death of Jesus on the cross at Golgotha, a love which was astonishingly shown as God raised his Son from death, a love which is sealed in our lives by the presence of God's Holy Spirit. God loves everyone so much that he welcomes us all – and welcomes us just as we are: foreigner, eunuch and all the rest. But – and here is the bit we must not forget in our haste to leap on whatever cultural bandwagon that happens to be passing – ***God welcomes us as we are, but he loves us too much to leave us as we are.*** The business of the Kingdom of God is transformation. One day we shall all be transformed, all changed into the perfect people who will spend eternity with him in that Kingdom. In the here and now, just as we offer people glimpses of that coming Kingdom, so God begins to offer us hints of that transformation as he helps us change into the people he wants us to be. And he wants us to be like that so that we can get the very best out of the life that he has given us.

You may have an issue with someone else's apparently glaring inadequacies or shortcomings. But what about yourself? We talked earlier about the idolatries which still plague many of us: just think of the ones beginning with G – gossip, gluttony and greed. Should we welcome you into church here week by week? Of course we should! But we pray that God will bring some kind of transformation. You see, in this chapter God makes it very clear that he will welcome anyone who comes seeking him. In the rest of the Bible he makes it very clear that those who come to seek him should be prepared to let him change them. So if God welcomes us, if God welcomes everyone, who on earth are we to deny anyone the opportunity to experience that, to debar them, to dismiss them or to denigrate them. I would love this church to be a place of true welcome, where anyone could come and be accepted, anyone could find love and compassion, anyone could start to find their way to discovering what an wonderful God we worship – and joining in.

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Questions for discussion

1. Should we still keep Sabbath? What do consider to be the marker of God's people today?
2. Why do so many people have an issue with foreigners? Have you ever experienced hostility because of your nationality? How did you feel?
3. How could we be more "foreigner-friendly" as a church? This passage refers to foreigners who want to be part of God's people (v6): should that make a difference to the way we relate to them? Why/why not?
4. What do you think was the real issue with eunuchs?
5. In what ways do we (Wade Street Church) fail people with disabilities? How could we be more welcoming to them?
6. How should we respond to those who are "sexually distinct"? Should we try to change them? Why/why not? If we should, how should we do it?
7. What effect might welcoming absolutely anyone have on the life of a church?
8. What are we going to do about all this?