

**“JUSTICE, RIGHTEOUSNESS & SALVATION”**

*Isaiah 56:1,2*

Just like any other organisation – a business, a school, a local council – a church has a particular reason to exist and a particular goal to fulfil. In recent years we’ve all tried to encapsulate that in some kind of short, pithy sentence: a mission statement or vision. Usually it’s something glaringly obvious like “*Educating your children*” or “*Serving the customer*”. The best one I ever saw was on one of those containers down by the side of the M42 which have advertising on the sides of them. I’ve no idea what the company was nor what its business was but it simply said “*Good at what we do*”, which is pretty well what you want from any enterprise.

Anyway, as we move into 2017 we’ve been thinking a bit about our vision here at Wade Street Church. The fuller version is on the walls of many of the rooms in these buildings, but the summary of it all is “*A church at the heart of the city, with Christ at the heart of the church*”. And as we have been revisiting that aspirational slogan, we have been looking at what God has to say in the Bible through the prophet Isaiah – and particularly focussing on *Isaiah 54 – 56*. That’s where our original vision was rooted and where we have been discovering some of the pointers to what we really ought to be about as followers of Jesus in this city.

These chapters are part of a longer section – and they reflect teaching that we find in many of the books of the Old Testament – which deals with the establishment of God’s Kingdom, God’s sovereign rule over all his creation. God created a good and perfect world in which human beings were put to flourish and prosper, and to steward it all, to co-manage it with God. But evil seeped in and the whole thing became distorted and perverted. God’s plan is to renew and restore that originally perfect creation and restore humanity to the special relationship that we had with God at the beginning. With evil eradicated, that Kingdom will be eternal and those who choose to take seriously what God teaches about it will have a place within it, a place made possible by the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, the Kingly Messiah who came to show us what the Kingdom would look like and who died to make it a possibility.

Within these three chapters we have been looking at the Kingdom as a place of welcome, a place where no-one is excluded and all who believe in God can worship freely. We saw last week that God loves us all so much that anyone is welcomed in just as they are, but God loves us all too much to let us stay as we are. Transformation is at the heart of it. Our church should equally be a place of welcome for all, with the call to transformation being part of that welcome. It is also to be a house of prayer, which we shall be looking at in a couple of weeks’ time.

Underpinning all this, though, is what we read in vv1,2 of this chapter. The words I read just a few moments ago talk about the values of this Kingdom: “*Maintain justice and do what is right*”. That’s a command from God, but like so much that we are asked to do as his followers, it’s a present command, based on a future promise and dependent on something that has already happened. Through Isaiah, God says that we are to live like that because he is already on the case – “*my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed*”. God is at work, already in the process of putting things to rights. He is bringing **salvation** – giving men and women the opportunity to be part of his Kingdom – and **righteousness** – the living out of the values of the Kingdom.

When God spoke through Isaiah, that process was yet to begin in Jesus. As we read back into it now we see that the process has well and truly begun. Jesus came into our world – the Messiah, the Christ (one word is Hebrew, one Greek for the one chosen and appointed by God) – and through his teaching and preaching started to describe what the Kingdom would be like. If you look at his parables, you’ll see that he often begins them with something along the lines of “*The Kingdom of God is like ...*” He debated and discussed with the gatekeepers of the old order the way in which this fitted in with what they already believed. But he also showed what it was all about as he healed people, as he gave hope to the despairing, as he restored dignity to the downtrodden, as he drew in the outcasts, as he offered new ways of looking at life and death. Then he died himself, acting as a kind of lightning rod for the forces of evil, taking on himself the consequences of our wrong choices and selfish decisions. God brought him back to life, to show that he keeps his promises and that there is absolutely nothing that can stand in the way of that.

As we accept that, as we put our faith in that story of salvation, in Jesus himself, putting the past behind us and receiving his forgiveness and enjoying his welcome, so we are called to live as Jesus did, offering other glimpses of the Kingdom of God in our own lives. This isn’t a command to live like this to try and get into God’s good books – work hard, live justly, love one another and you might just squeeze into this eternal Kingdom if you’ve done enough. This is a call to respond to what God has already done and to what he promises us for the future. God has taken the initiative in Jesus and asks us to respond by living out these values, by showing in our own lives something of the justice and righteousness that characterise the Kingdom of God.

This is about putting faith into action. A church can be a great place to come to meet other people, to indulge our love of music, to exercise our ability to debate and discuss – but if that’s what it’s all about then it’s really nothing more than a kind of social club, something that we tack on to the rest of our lives which can then remain pretty well unchanged. We’re not talking about intellectual assent, a kind of cerebral belief in something a bit different. We’re talking about a whole life spent living out the things

we believe. We're talking about showing that it works, that this is a faith worth holding on to because it transforms things. That's what those words from James' Letter were all about. You can't claim to be a follower of Jesus if it doesn't make a difference to what happens in your life from Monday to Saturday, if it doesn't affect your decision making, the way you use your resources, the manner of your conversations, the responses you make to the injustices you see around you.

As Isaiah says here, we are to act justly and follow God's ways. After all, we believe that God created us – however that might have happened – so we should accept that he knows how we are to get the best out of life. His words to us are, if you like, the Manufacturer's Instruction, the things you follow if you want it all to work properly. Isaiah mentions one of those things here – the Sabbath, the day of rest each week. As we said last week, that was always the marker of the people of God. The Sabbath was something that was very distinctive about the Jewish people and which they jealously guarded as part of their Law – and, indeed, still do today. It was their USP, their Unique Selling Point. It meant that everyone had the opportunity to take some rest and to find time to worship God. Whatever you may think about the advantages of such an arrangement – and most people, let's face it, don't really keep a Sabbath any more – the principle behind it was that keeping it showed a desire to arrange and organise your life in accordance with God's will. That's another aspect of this set of Kingdom attitudes, of living as God says is best for us.

You see, what this boils down to is that God has made it possible for us, through Jesus, to escape the consequences of our own sin, our own wrong choices and foolish decisions, and to live with him in his Kingdom, his restored creation. That is what salvation is all about. And if we are prepared to put our faith in that, to believe that it works – if we are ready to accept that God knows best and can help us to get the very best out of life here and now, and for the eternal future – then we are to live it out day by day in the way that we respond to others, in the way that we respond to God, in the way that we order our lives, in the attitudes that we develop and the actions that we perform. Like Jesus, we are to welcome those who are overlooked and ostracised by others, we are to bring his message of hope to the desperate, to help to alleviate the poverty of the disadvantaged, to love the unloved, to show hospitality to the stranger and the refugee, to display our own sure and certain hope for the life beyond the here and now.

*“Maintain justice and do what is right, for my salvation is close at hand and my righteousness will soon be revealed.”* The question that confronts us all this morning is: Are you prepared to put your faith in God's salvation to the extent that you live in his righteousness? You can't really have one without the other.

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*Isaiah 56:1,2 – James 2:14-26*

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### **Questions for discussion**

- 1) How would you define "justice"?
- 2) What is "salvation"?
- 3) Why is the Sabbath so important here? Should we do more to keep it today? Why/why not?
- 4) *"Faith without deeds is dead."* What do you understand by that? How should that affect our lives personally and as a church?
- 5) Is there anything about these verses that particularly strikes you? What are you going to do about it?