



**Isaiah 55.1-9**  
**Luke 13.1-9**  
**20<sup>th</sup> March 2022**

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## **A Hope that Never Dies**

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*Lord God, our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.*

A few weeks ago we stood in the Scottish National Gallery enjoying an hour or so of looking at some wonderful and inspiring paintings. I especially liked a cityscape, painted at the beginning of the 1800's showing the construction of Edinburgh's New Town. The old loch beside the medieval Old Town had been drained, now used as Princes Street Gardens, and beside that a new Georgian town of smart terraces and classical squares was being constructed. We had spent the last few days walking those streets so it was fascinating being transported back in time by this painting to the moment of their creation.

Building something new can give a great sense of hope.

I wonder what it must have felt like here at Amersham on the Hill to see farms such as Woodside and Hervines being turned into streets, houses and shops all clustering around the new railway station just over a hundred years ago?

Perhaps the people of Southend felt a similar sense of hope recently when Prince Charles presented them with the Letters Patent making their town into a city. A move that would surely have thrilled their former MP.

There is an equal sense of despair as we look out on Ukraine this spring. Cities, towns and communities not being built up but raised to the ground. And we weep with those whose hope is being tested as never before.

In today's reading from Isaiah we read of those who have travelled to Jerusalem from half a century in exile in Babylon. They have this sense of place. A sense of a new beginning. And today's reading addresses them as they once more take up residence in a place called home.

The book we call Isaiah probably has several authors and the section before today's passage is often called *The Book of Comfort*. These are words written to a people in exile who need encouragement. Encouragement to continue to sing a

song in a strange land, to continue to pray and continue to believe.

Yet around chapter 49 the tone changes and maybe even the author too. Now the words are addressed to a people who have returned home. They've had their own second Exodus, this time not out of Egypt but Babylon.

The style of Isaiah 55 is that of a Jewish Misarum. Misarum's were issued at the start of a new King's reign. Debts were forgiven and a great banquet held. Hence all the references to water, grain, wine and milk in today's passage. It's a picture of plenty and celebration as a new time dawns. Hope after despair and joy after sorrow.

Come to the waters, calls Isaiah. Probably the waters of Jerusalem. Waters they could only dream of in exile but taste now they were back home.

Yet this homecoming isn't just painted in terms of celebration with a Misarum meal, it's also an opportunity to get back into the habit of listening to God.

Now you may have thought such an injunction wouldn't be necessary. Surely, even, or maybe especially in exile, the people would have been listening out for God. This, after all is Israel, called to be a light to the nations, yet how could they shine for God if they had become dulled to his message?

And that really is what Isaiah has been saying right through this book. 76 times in these pages the charge is laid before the people: *You do not listen to what God is saying to you.*

So, in this morning's passage we have this plea from the prophet, verse 3: *Listen and then you will fare well,* or in verse 6: *Seek the Lord.*

In saying this Isaiah is plugging in to the Wisdom Tradition that was well known and readily understood in those ancient days. The idea that one way of understanding God is to call her Wisdom. A deep wisdom that isn't secret and inaccessible, but a truth that can be understood. And so, the somewhat groundbreaking idea developed in Israel's monotheism that God could actually be KNOWN. Not a stoical and distant deity, but the God who spoke, who walked before you, who comforted, directed and encouraged. That was the Wisdom of God – and the key to accessing that blessing was to listen to God. God could become known by listening.

What a charge then! What an indictment! What an incredible missed opportunity! To be told no less than 76 times in the book of Isaiah that you have not listened.

It's a precious skill and may account for the fact we have two ears yet only one mouth – to listen!

It's also a Lenten theme; listening out for God and making space to hear God's voice.

It comes in silence, in worship, in study and reflection. It comes in planned moments and in unexpected epiphanies.

And it often comes as we listen to one another. A cry for help, from a family member or a community in Ukraine can also be the voice of God speaking to us.

Listen, listen, listen, says Isaiah. To know God, and by extension to know God's world and your brothers and sisters in it, begins by listening.

And it was important to do that because this return to Jerusalem was not an easy new beginning.

When Cyrus and The Persian Empire let the people go, they returned to a city ruin. Jerusalem was not the Edinburgh New Town in the picture I so admired, it was a place of desolation. 50 years ago, it had been destroyed and ransacked and for many returning this was simply a place talked of by their elders, for the younger generation to all intents and purposes Babylon was home not Jerusalem.

For years talk around the tables must have been of returning from exile. It had been a longing, to return 'home', which had defined them. Yet now it was happening perhaps it slowly dawned that journeys end was no utopia. This was not a prosperous time. Social and economic structures were weak. People squabbled over available land and Nehemiah even describes children being sold into debt slavery just to get by.

Perhaps some of the dynamics of such a time are not so very foreign to us in these days of Lent.

We are only just emerging from a pandemic that rocked our way of life and we longed for better days, and it seemed they beckoned as February ended. And at that very moment we moved from one world crisis to another with the invasion of Ukraine.

Life often unravels in that way, even family life. Just when we think we are through one struggle the path gets even steeper.

And that, I think, is where the theme of hope must enter our personal and international narrative.

Isaiah called the people to listen to God and he then gives them words full of hope: *Come for water, all who are thirsty, though you have no money, come and*

*buy grain and eat...Listen to me and you will fare well...*

So, how do we find hope in bleak days, whether they are 500 years before Jesus in a blitzed Jerusalem or 2000 years after him in blooded Europe?

Well, it seems to me that in the journey of faith our life experience does two things to us to make us the people we are.

On the one hand what we go through in life shapes us and will inevitably shape our faith. We each have a context and it is powerful, whether it is pandemic, war, relationships, job, family or finance.

Yet, on the other hand, for people of faith, isn't it our beliefs about God that also shapes life. We are not just passive recipients of everything life throws at us, we have opportunities to shape life in the light of the values we hold and the beliefs that stir us. Hope, our hope in God, can change our lives and society around us.

This Lent I'm reading a super book by Peter Graystone called *All's well that ends well*. He's looking at a piece of Shakespeare every day and asking some poignant questions through the eyes of faith. Recently he reflected on the later plays of the Bard. He was no longer the angry young man writing his histories and tragedies. By the time he wrote the play *Cymbeline* the plot is remarkably like *Romeo and Juliet* with the hero taking a potion and faking death. But unlike *Juliet*, Shakespeare, now writing in his later years, has *Imogen* wake from her sleep and have a future. And unlike in *King Lear* a family recovers from division and is healed.

Peter Graystone writes: *It's as if the ageing playwright cannot bring himself to let hope die.*

I loved that! I think it's the message of *Isaiah* to a people returning to a fractured Jerusalem and I think it's the constant message of faith to us today as we too live in an often-struggling world.

To rewrite Graystone's sentence. As people of faith, who 'seek the Lord', we cannot bring ourselves to let hope die.

May it be so in the name of God who never leaves us even in the toughest of struggles. Amen