

Isaiah 35.4-7a p.597

James 2.1-10 p.204

8th September 2024

Doxologies against the Data

Introduction to the Theme

Since last December I've spent quite a lot of time at the Oxford Eye hospital. It was there that they expertly spot welded my split retina back together.

It's a big department within the John Radcliffe complex and sitting in the huge waiting room is always something of an education. The doctors and nurses are dedicated to saving the sight of every patient referred to them. Some patients have so little they need to be chaperoned to a seat. Others look really worried as they enter and love the opportunity to sit alongside a fellow patient and compare notes, with the rest of us listening in.

Church friends who've had, say a cataract removed, often tell me how different the world seems afterwards, with a clearer focus and brighter colours.

Seeing the world differently isn't just a physical sensation, it can also be a spiritual awakening and constant re-awakening.

This September some 18-year-olds will start a course at university whilst others may have already embarked upon a Gap Year. Whether planned personally or undertaken through organisations like Raleigh, Habitat for Humanity or even the BMS, these young adults will probably arrive at their 19th birthdays as changed people. Having lived in a different environment, often a 2/3rds World context, they might well return home now seeing the world differently.

Our two readings this morning have that as a common theme. Both Isaiah and James ask us, as it were, to put on a new pair of glasses. Isaiah urges us to see the future differently and James wants us to see people differently.

So, let's look out for the sacredness to be found in both texts and what it teaches us about developing a different point of view.

The Sermon

Gracious God, we thank you for your word in scripture and made flesh in the Lord Jesus Christ. Help us now to catch your voice and speak, we pray, to our hearts and minds. In Jesus' name. Amen.

During our recent conversation between AFC's Eldership and St Michael's PCC we learnt that our church neighbour has a poet in their membership. A poet that not only writes verse

but sells it too. Apparently, many in the congregation value her work and she's become something of their Poet in Residence.

Our reading from the Jewish Scriptures this morning is filled with exquisite poetry. There are some great phrases in Isaiah 35 such as: *Be strong, fear not, the eyes of the blind will be opened, the lame will leap like the deer and water will spring in the wilderness.*

This is a poet who sees the world differently.

Isaiah, although it only has one name attached to it, was probably written by at least three different people, or even schools of people. Scholars, rather unimaginatively call them Isaiah 1, 2 and 3. This morning's passage comes at the end of Isaiah 1.

And that's important because we don't get to the really hopeful bit of the book until Isaiah 3. The first two parts are set in the bleakest of days, either just before or part of the Exile. It's only Isaiah 3 that rings a note of hope describing post exilic days with the people returned to Jerusalem and starting to rebuild.

So, Isaiah 35, today's reading seems to have the most optimistic poetry, but isn't it set at the wrong time?

So, why put the poem here? It seems like a word out of place.

A famous commentator on the Jewish Scriptures, Walter Bruggeman puts it rather playfully when he says: *Isaiah's doxologies are characteristically against the data!*

In other words it seems like our poet is talking about God's blessings when, if you look out of the window, all you can see is a harsh life and a struggling people. The data doesn't add up.

This impatience for love, this longing for good to win through, this desire to work for goodness right now, seems to be a constant theme running through scripture.

For Isaiah's readers it might still be the exile but already they were dreaming of and working towards a day when God's light would break into their darkness.

In the days of Jesus, six hundred years later, when the nation lived under political oppression and the accepted norm of slavery, the message our Lord preached also looked at the world differently. He spoke of a radical respect for all humanity, especially those on the margins. Jesus urged his followers to believe in the Kingdom of God. That's a way of looking at life through a different set of glasses. Of holding on to hope even on tough days.

I can't imagine what it's like to live in Ukraine or Gaza right now. Yet I suspect there will be people, wonderful people, in these places who continue to live with hope even in the context of despair. They see the world differently, not as it is but as it could be. And for them and those around them we pray that the poetry of Isaiah will soon become a lived reality. *That the eyes of the blind will be opened, the lame will leap like the deer and water will spring up in the wilderness.*

Now if Isaiah, through words of poetry, is trying to get us to see the future differently,

James, through a cutting story, tries to get us to see people differently.

A few years ago, I was invited to a very smart Livery lunch in London by a church member. Everyone in the banqueting hall was very smartly dressed. Even I had put on my best suit! That is, all apart from a man two tables opposite us who was wearing a tatty pullover. How nice, I thought, rather patronisingly, they've invited the caretaker.

Imagine my embarrassment when I was told on the way home that the man eating lunch in the pullover was the richest man in the room that lunchtime. I had been guilty of judging a book by its cover – *Mea Cupla!*

James is a much loved New Testament letter by many because it seems so practical and down to earth. So, for folk who like their Christianity to be rooted in the real world, James is a winner.

Chapter two paints a picture of a congregation making a fuss over the arrival of a well-dressed worshipper, whilst sidelining a poorly dressed one.

It wouldn't have been the first congregation to have sung *All are welcome* whilst practising that some are more welcome than others.

So, what is it that made Isaiah look differently at the future with hope, and James look at people differently with respect?

Well, isn't it the concept of God? Isaiah believed in God. And that belief was about hope. So, if Isaiah puts the concept of God into the future that means believing in hope for tomorrow.

The same is true of James and is the reason for his different way of seeing.

It's sometimes said that there is always a space between you and me, between you and anyone. And that's the space God occupies. That's a good thing. God is part of the equation of our relationships. And if part of our concept of God is love. Then the space between me and another person can be filled with love and with respect.

James calls us to use a different matrix in assessing a person's worth. It's not about what they can do but who they are. And in a respectful mutuality it's as much about what we can do for them as about what they can give to us. It's about recognising that God fills the space between me and you and in so doing blesses our relationship.

Seeing the world differently is part of what faith is all about. The stories of Jesus guide us, the poetry of Isaiah inspires us and the practical, down to earth illustrations of James teach us.

I want to close today by seeking to illustrate some of the themes that Isaiah and James bring to us from the life of one of our own. I wrote this sermon some time

ago, because I anticipated I would be on Jury Service this week, (as it happens that didn't work out) anyway, I looked at these passages on the day I conducted Margaret Lambert's funeral.

As is often the case on these occasions people poured out of church saying they had known very little about Margaret's life and how good it was to have the fuller picture painted. Yet one of her friends told me they pretty much knew most of her biography apart from learning that afternoon that Margaret had been a regular volunteer visitor to the Aylesbury Young Offenders Centre.

So, here's how I think Margaret's way of looking at the world links our two readings.

After the war Margaret joined up with a United Nations sponsored group of young people to go to Austria and work in the refugee camps. She cooked in the canteen. She got to know people who had lost everything as a result of war. As a lady who believed in peace, a young woman of deep conviction and principle, she went and lived among those whose lives had been ripped apart. She longed to play a small part in bringing them hope. She experienced their pain. But, as in the poetry of Isaiah, she saw the future differently. So, she came home to England and became one of the first women to be regularly on the Rotary Club circuit of speakers, raising funds so that these refugee camps eventually closed as people were enabled to become established citizens once more.

I think that experience was seminal for Margaret. So, in later years as Head of a girls High School she did everything in her power to help her students have the benefits of a fine education. Yet Margaret saw people differently, just as James asks us too. So, she didn't stop at helping the top-level students of a High School, she also became a volunteer visitors to a Young Offenders Remind Centre. Isn't that wonderful. To have the eyes of faith that could see the world as a better place and to see people, even those who'd ended up on the wrong side of the tracks, as worthy of worth, investment and respect.

I thank God today for a member of our congregation whose memory can be an inspiration to us all in looking at the world, and looking at people differently.

May we all learn to look that way, in the name of God who looks at us with hope, love and respect. Amen