

## How to read the Bible for all it's worth (Part 7):

### ‘Jesus as prophecy and history’<sup>i</sup>

Hoon Hay Presbyterian Church, 6 December 2020

Isaiah 7:1-17

Matthew 1

(+ other references as indicated)

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I came across an amusing list this week. The question was asked:

‘If you could rid the world of one thing, what would it be?’

As usual, there was a mix of serious and comical replies. Among the serious ones were:

*Fake Media, Greed, Pessimism, Cancer, Cruelty, Poverty,  
Abuse against children, Death, and Sin.*

I don't think anyone could disagree with these answers – the world would certainly be a better place without each of these ‘nasties’. However, there were also some highly amusing responses including:

*Mayonnaise & Salad Dressing, Brussel Sprouts, Vegan Sausages, Pineapple on Pizza,  
The Dallas Cowboys, Diaper Blowouts, and the cleverest of all (in my opinion)  
was I better not say she might read this post!*

For God's people, both the ancient Hebrews and early Christians, Jew and Gentile, one thing (although there were many things) they wanted rid of was a foreign oppressor. Whether it was the Egyptians, the Philistines, the Assyrians, Babylonians, the Seleucids (in the period between the Old and New Testaments), and of course, the Romans in the time of Jesus, the Apostles, and the Early Church, there always seemed to be a ruling and often cruel overlord.

Other times though, it was a case of the enemy within. A foreign oppressor represents an obvious enemy but when the Israelites assimilated foreign and pagan gods, worship of YHWH was compromised. This is called idolatry.

When the united Israel collapsed after the reign of King Solomon there was a house divided with the northern kingdom (which retained the name ‘Israel’) and the southern kingdom which was Judah (including Jerusalem). Each had its own monarch and dynasty and both kingdoms suffered further spiritual decline with Israel eventually succumbing to the Assyrians in 722 BC/BCE, and 136 years later, Judah and Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians, in 586 BC/BCE. In both cases the invading armies were followed by captivity and exile.

Our Isaiah reading sees the prophet in dialogue with King Ahaz of Judah at a time when the northern kingdom was seeking to attack in an unholy alliance with the Arameans (Syrians). Israel was also known as Ephraim in our reading. What a terrible period in

history for God's people and yet it's here we read prophetically of the Advent of Jesus Christ many centuries into the future.

This series is called 'How to read the Bible for all it's worth' and over the last year we have been discussing various tools of interpretation needed in our 'toolbox'.

These include:

- understanding the historical context and who was originally speaking or writing
- reading around the passage
- researching the cross references
- understanding the use of key words, and phrases, and the genre (the type of text) and metaphor.

The Scriptures are complex and never self-interpreting so knowing when and how to employ these and other tools is essential.

I will attempt now to employ some of these tools as we consider mention of the Advent story in Isaiah Chapter 7. I will explain some of the background and the twists and turns of the text and link these to Matthew Chapter 1. If we can do that, we really will be reading the Bible for all it's worth!

So, let's dig deep and take a closer look at Isaiah Chapter 7 working through the verses.

The year is 734 BC/BCE and v.1 provides the setting which locates Isaiah in a particular timeframe in Judah's history. Two important cross references are **2 Kings 15:37**, and then on into **Chapter 16**. Since Solomon there had been 12 kings; the 10<sup>th</sup> being Uzziah and the 12<sup>th</sup> Ahaz. It was the custom in ancient Hebrew culture to establish a person within their family line, so here Ahaz is identified within the genealogy of recent monarchs. So are the kings of Aram (Syria); King Rezin, and of Israel, King Pekah. Chapter 6 begins with Isaiah's famous vision of glory but goes on to predict (in light of what he saw) the unbelief and unfaithfulness of God's people, while Chapter 7 and onwards records their historical manifestation. The two other kings wanted to persuade Ahaz to join them in opposing the Assyrians but Isaiah assures him no attack will come (v.7).

In v.3 prophet and king meet. Isaiah takes with him his son whose name – *Shear-Jashub* – is significant and means 'a remnant will return'. In all that was about to unfold, there would be a greater plan of God's mercy and indeed, a remnant would eventually return to the land promised to the forefathers. When Isaiah encounters him, Ahaz was overseeing the work for defence and the cutting off of the water supply from the enemy as well as securing it for the city. He was clearly aware of an imminent attack (v.3).

There is a tone of contempt in v.4 as he compares the northern invaders with the divine plan. 'Be careful, keep calm, and don't be afraid' (this is perhaps where Winston Churchill found inspiration in 1940 when England was being bombed: 'Keep Calm and Carry On'). Verses 6 and 7 provide a clear contrast between the intrigue and fleeting plans of men and the vision of the Lord's transcendence that Isaiah received at the start

of Chapter 6 (the *KJV* speaks here of ‘vexing’ Judah – a good word – which means angering and annoying it). This reminds us, too, that no matter how we may fear what is happening in our world, God’s plans can never be thwarted and will always prevail. The way the text is laid-out in vv.7-9 implies that direct counsel is being given to Ahaz.

Apparently, however, he doesn’t get it – or want to get what’s being said, and v.10 is more direct. God is being merciful to Ahaz who doesn’t appear to be listening. He was one of Judah’s worst kings who refused God’s help and had tried to buy aid from the Assyrians with gold and silver from the temple (**2 Kings 16:8**). He also indulged in child sacrifice (burning his own son) to the Canaanite god Molech (**2 Kings 16:3**).

God invites Ahaz to ask for a sign, but he hides behind a false religiosity by saying he will not put God to the test (v.12). This monumental hypocrisy is a reminder that if we are aware of God’s mercy we should not use any religious ritual to justify a non-response. Interestingly, Isaiah still uses the phrase ‘house of David’ in v.13) which implies special continuity with God’s promises to David and covenantal faithfulness. God remains faithful even when we aren’t.

Ahaz may have been the current king in the line of David but it was upon him to hear and receive the divine word through the prophet. Similarly, we who are ‘in Christ’ (Paul’s phrase) have choice: we can live in alignment and ‘keep in step’ with the Spirit (Galatians 5:25) or we can still exercise our own will in ungodly choices.

All this leads into a prophecy of Jesus which will be fulfilled many centuries later.

‘Immanuel’ (v.14) is a symbolic name referring to the saviour with us. Interestingly, verses 14-17 have no special importance in the Jewish tradition but for Christians they are highly significant (Orthodox Jews do not, of course, accept Christ as the prophesied Messiah).

I find it fascinating that God revealed these insights to Isaiah in the context of an impending regional war in c.735 BC/BCE. The prophet was active for around 60 years in the Southern Kingdom (Judah) before he was executed during Manasseh’s reign (c.695-643 BC/BCE). Manasseh was also unfaithful: he desecrated Solomon’s Temple with idols, worshipped pagan gods, and like Ahaz, indulged in child sacrifice. These were dreadful violations; later, however, he humbly repented (**2 Chronicles 33:12**). The prayer of Manasseh is attributed to him and it appears in the Apocrypha or ‘hidden books’ of the Bible. At the time of our passage, though, God’s chosen people were divided, calling on pagan neighbours and on the brink of war. How messy and horrible.

I doubt that the confused King Ahaz or even Isaiah himself could, at that time, fully appreciate the import of this prophecy but with the fullness of time, you and I can. Matthew Chapter 1 vv.9-11 cite both Ahaz and Manasseh in the genealogy of Jesus – look again at those verses (in the bulletin). Among the rampant idolatry we see two faithful kings: Hezekiah and Josiah; the latter instituted major religious reforms. He is described in **2 Kings 22:2** and **2 Chronicles 34:2** as a righteous king, who ‘walked in all the way of David his father, and turned not aside to the right hand or to the left’. How

refreshing after all the compromise and idolatry! We can easily miss what the names in Matthew 1 mean and the history behind them, but I think there are some very significant points of application for us as we enter another Advent season.

**Firstly**, in the middle of an impending ancient war God reveals the key aspect of His greater plan for Israel's – and the Gentiles' – redemption. The threat of civil war would create anxiety and great uncertainty.

It might have a modern parallel in the recent history of Ireland, where the Protestant north has remained loyal to the British Crown, while the south is predominantly Roman Catholic and Republican. Many of us can recall the media images of bloodshed as the IRA and northern paramilitary forces battled it out in the streets. Ugly stuff. But time and again, in Scripture and in history, it's in the messiest places that God breaks through.

In Isaiah 7 we see division, threats, unholy alliances and yet God promises Himself to be among His people. The fulfilment of this prophecy saw Jesus among the lowly and the down-and-out of his time. God is present.

Whatever you and I are facing this Christmas – loneliness, grief, anxiety, financial issue or health concerns, God is *with*, *in*, and *among* us. Every other faith requires us to work towards divine favour – what Paul would call a salvation of works – but in Jesus Christ, God has taken the initiative to reach down to us; the creatures made in His image, to bring us salvation and the invite us to be co-workers in a cosmic plan for redemption. That's Good News!

**Secondly**, we see divine patience despite the idolatry of both Israel and Judah. We too, can feel very distant from God and unworthy, but God remains present despite our feelings to the contrary and our unfaithfulness. He calls us to repent and trust, and as we do, a greater plan will unfold, as it was in the text.

**Thirdly**, King Ahaz of Judah sounded religious (v.12) but he was shirking and didn't want to know the truth. I can be like that too; but obedience requires more than talk and seemingly impressive intentions or outwardly good behaviour. We can fool others and even ourselves with certain self-talk but not God who looks at the heart, rather than the outward appearance (**1 Samuel 16:7**).

When we come to the light, darkness is dispelled, everything takes on its proper perspective, and healing and restoration can begin. God calls us to the light and life that is in Christ. Some people prefer the deeds of darkness and that remains their choice but living in the light is God's intention for us. As a lad I remember lifting logs and stones and seeing slaters everywhere scamper for the damp and darkness – they couldn't stand the light. Some people are like that too.

So, to sum up: may it sink in afresh to our hearts and minds that *God is with us*. Moses went up a mountain to encounter God, Solomon built a temple, and pagans fashioned idols and offered sacrifices to them, but in Christ by the power of the Holy Spirit, God is with us: *you and me, right now and always*. And that presence is what Christmas really

means. The Word (John 1), the Logos (reason/rationale/essence), the Son, eternally co-existent with the Father and the Holy Spirit, now incarnate and ascended; the God of all creation and time, *is with us!*

If I can let that profound truth get into my head, heart, and affections just a little more this Advent, I will be encouraged and better equipped to face what lies ahead in 2021 and beyond. You will too! The Prince of Peace with, in, and working through me and us. I won't be quite so seduced by the glitter and glam and crazy commercialism and bustle that the world offers; I'll be more content with the inner peace of God's empowering presence.

***Amen.***

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