

Salvation for God's Chosen people

Isaiah 44:1-5

The wider context of this passage is the judgment which Isaiah prophesied against Israel and Judah on account of widespread idolatry. We see it coming out in verse 9-11 of chapter 44 where once again Isaiah denounces idolatry and says all who worship them; who have the figures and figurines of idols in their homes will be put to shame. Their idols cannot help them. They can't keep the demons away. They are deaf and dumb objects of wood and stone and give their worshippers no profit at all as Isaiah puts it in verse 9.

If Isaiah were alive today what idols would he denounce? What do many in New Zealand put their trust in today? Their superannuation schemes, investments, the government, science? Have these not become the Dagon, Ashtoreths and Baals of today symbols of power which many look to for security and fulfilment instead of God?

According to Govt. Census statistics far fewer people are attending church and worshipping God on the Lord's day in New Zealand than a few decades ago which means that more and more people are idolaters.

This is a concern for those who remain faithful and who believe and trust in God's word. Will this trend continue? When Jesus returns will there be faith on the earth?

This is a concern sometimes expressed by parents of young children. What will the future hold for our children? Will they be safe as Christians? Will there be more marginalisation and persecution of the church in the future. Will they enjoy the freedom to worship as we do now?

For God's people who are caught up in a society which is obsessed with idolatry our text contains a message of comfort and hope for God's people in every age

In that message we note three things

1. The first being God's covenant faithfulness.

In verse 2 the familiar name of God is used. In our English translations the name is the LORD with all the letters of that name capitalised. In the Hebrew the name is YHWH. YHWH is the name God gave Moses to identify himself at the burning bush and YHWH means I AM. Isaiah will use that name to emphasise the reality of God's existence compared to the non existence of idol gods. God is I AM, the idols are nothing, merely figments of people's imaginations and the worship of creatures and created things rather than the Creator.

Furthermore the name YHWH is loaded with meaning. Since God is I AM, he is self-existent. He is not dependant on anyone or anything other than Himself. Consequently and every other person that owes its or his or her existence to God. We are His idea, he formed us and made us what we are. In him we live and move and have our being.

The name YHWH also tells us that he wants to have a relationship with his chosen people when the Lord appeared to Moses in the burning bush. He chose Moses to lead the Israelites out of Egypt and revealed Himself to Moses at the burning bush in order to enter into covenant relationship with Moses. He entered into this relationship out of love. With respect to the nation Israel it says in Deuteronomy 7:7 "The Lord did not set his love on you or

choose you because you were more in number than any of the people for you were the fewest of all people, but because the Lord loved you and kept the oath which he swore to your forefathers.

The Lord's love is everlasting. He is faithful keeping his promises and the name YHWH will have reassured God's people of his love and faithfulness along with the rest of Isaiah's prophecy here in chapter 44.

Isaiah says on the Lord's behalf, "Listen O Jacob my servant and Israel whom I have chosen . Thus says the Lord who made you and formed you from the womb who will help you. Do not fear O Jacob my servant and Jeshuran whom I have chosen."

The record of Salvation History is therefore a record of God's faithfulness to his covenant promises and though there was widespread idolatry those whom God had chosen who trusted in him God would surely help in times of trouble. To those who are the Lord's servants rather than serving idols God says to them "Do not be afraid"

Who are those whom God has chosen today? Are we not those who serve the Lord; those who have separated themselves from the world in order to be the Lord's servants? Since the use of the words Jacob, Israel and servant are used interchangeably here to mean all of God's children we can take that to mean all who are God's adopted children through faith in Jesus Christ today. They are all who like our forefather Abraham believed and to whom that faith was credited as righteousness. They are all who according to Romans 12:1 want to live a sacrificial life of service to God. To those who want to serve the Lord he says "do not be afraid."

Don't be afraid of the opposition of an idolatrous society or bringing children into the world, adverse circumstances or even judgment. Do not be afraid if your own thoughts accuses you. As Paul explained in Romans 7, we know what we ought to do but so often we do the opposite. Like the Israelites on Isaiah's day we are surrounded by idolatry and are at times tainted by it, but God keeps his promises and is faithful towards those who trust in him. There is no condemnation in Christ.

John 10:28-30 puts it well where the Lord Jesus says "My sheep listen to my voice and they follow me and I give them eternal life and they shall never perish and no-one can snatch them out of my hand. My Father who has given them to me is greater than all.. No one can snatch them out of my Father's hand.

So though we have our failings and struggles God's promises continue to hold and when it comes to our little children such as Bruno we are reminded of that. Though they so small and helpless their baptism is a sign and seal of God's everlasting faithfulness and of his keeping covenant with us. His message to us as a church as believers as parents as individuals is "do not fear!"

2. In the second place not only is God faithful to his covenant promises but we also have an assurance here of **God's covenant blessings**. The first blessing indicated in the passage is the forgiveness of sins. That can be deduced from the word do not fear O Jacob my servant Jeshuran whom I have chosen. What would the Israelites be afraid of? Chapter 22: 23 gives us an indication . It says" You have not called upon me O Jacob, you have not wearied yourselves for me O Israel, you have not honoured me with your sacrifices" and further on

“you have burdened me with your sins and wearied me with your offences.” They were afraid of the Judgment Isaiah was prophesying about at length. They may have at some point or another sinned against God. But here in this part of the prophecy there is a word of comfort and hope for those who wholeheartedly serve the Lord. “Do not be afraid!” God is a God who readily forgives repentant sinners.

Then there is also the use of the word’s Jacob and Jeshurun used interchangeably and referring to the nation Israel. The root meaning of the word Jacob means “to deceive” and Jeshurun means upright one. So even though God’s chosen ones were sinful and deceivers as Jacob himself once was when he cheated his brother Esau out of his birthright as the firstborn of father Isaac. Nevertheless Jacob was in God’s eyes and by faith Jeshurun. Hew and all who believed were righteous made righteous by grace through faith in a Gracious God who forgives.

This is true for us as well. The sacrament of baptism tells us that. Just as surely as water washed dirt from the body so Christ’s blood cleanses us from sin. The death of Christ on the cross is the grounds for that. He who has no sin became sin for us so that we might be Jeshurun, the righteousness of God.

The other blessing evident in the passage is the blessing of the gift of the Holy Spirit Isaiah wrote For I will pour out water on the thirsty land and streams on the dry ground I will pour my Spirit on your offspring and my blessing on your descendants and they will spring up among the grass like poplars by streams of water.”

The images Isaiah uses here of water which God supplies generously. Similarly the Holy Spirit will be poured out like water on dry land. For example when rains come to a parched desert within a few days there is often a dramatic change in scenery. The once dry dusty desert becomes fields covered in lush grass wildflowers and trees growing along waterways. This is reminiscent of Psalm one which describes the godly law abiding man who like a tree planted by a stream is fruitful and prosperous.

Isaiah says that God’s people his chosen ones will be like that. They flourish, unlike those who follow false god’s. Their civilisations come and go but those who belong to God and serve him possess an everlasting kingdom.

When would this take place? The returning exiles had a foretaste of these blessings when they returned to Jerusalem. However this prophecy really points forward to the time of Christ whose death and resurrection guarantees our forgiveness of sins and to Pentecost when the Spirit was poured out on the church and thousands were saved , like grass springing up in a meadow, like trees planted by rivers.

Since that time we’ve been able to see in hindsight the result of this pouring out of God’s Spirit on the church. The church is now worldwide. This hasn’t happened by the power of human persuasion or by the way of crusades but by the message of the cross and the power of the Holy Spirit. This expansion has taken place through plenty of opposition and persecutions. Often it has been the case that the blood of martyrs has become the seed of the future church. The church has become a world wide church notwithstanding her own mistakes, heretical teachers, mis-interpretations of the Bible, Christological controversies, a world changing Reformation, the ongoing battle with modernism, liberalism legalism, existentialism and every other ism which has tried and tested the true church of the Lord

Jesus Christ. In some cases enemies of the church have tried to exterminate the Church such as Haman in Esther's day, Herod who tried to destroy baby Jesus, or in more recent times Isis in some parts of the world. But nothing can stop the gospel's advance

Revelation 6:2 depicts a rider on a white horse going out like a conqueror bent on conquest. In the midst of wars, famine or any other thing which might prevent the spread of the gospel the rider marches on unstoppable. The gospel will continue to do its work until Jesus Christ returns and during that time God's covenant blessings continue to be given to his chosen people to those who trust and serve Him.

So we can have confidence in God. He has and will remain faithful to his promises. He will continue to bless us with forgiveness of sins, the Holy Spirit and many other blessings besides. That brings me to the third thing;

3. Our covenant responsibilities which Isaiah spells out for us in verse 5. "This one will say I am the Lord's and that one will call on the name of Jacob and another will write on his hand "belonging to the Lord" and will name Israel's name with honor. Well this was really a statement about the faithful remnant who continued to trust in the Lord and in his faithfulness. In fact it's a statement about all who trust God and His word today. Because Isaiah was also looking forward confidently to the day when many would flock into the covenant community and profess their faith in Israel's God. That is anticipated in chapter 54 where it says 'Enlarge the place of your tents, stretch your tent curtains wide, do not hold back, lengthen your cords strengthen your stakes for you will spread to the right and the left and your descendants will dispossess the nations and settle in their cities'"

Once again this prophecy has had its fulfilment in Christ and the establishment of his church. Since that time many have said "I am the Lord's". Many have also called on the name of Jacob; in New Testament parlance, called on the name of Christ; called themselves Christians. To write on the hand "belonging to the Lord" adds another important dimension to our faith. In Isaiah's day slaves were often marked on the hand as belonging to their owner. It's our covenant responsibility to make that same confession by word and deed. HC LD has the wording "I am not my own but belong body and soul to my faithful savior Jesus Christ." But that confession has to be one that is lived out.

And this is what we've witnessed again today with Will and Emma bringing Bruno forward to be baptised and then also promising to bring him up to know and serve the Lord.

This is our covenant responsibility, notice the word response in that. God is ever faithful. He always keeps his word. He is one who blesses his people with forgiveness and the gift of the Holy Spirit and so now;...how will you respond to that?

Many people write Christians on their census forms but that's the extent of their identification with Christ; a tick in a box.

What we are encouraged to do here is not just take on the name but also to take on the visible mark of a slave or a servant and serve the LORD as Jacob did; As Isaiah did as the true Israelites did and as the sincere Christian does. We identify most closely with Christ and respond to God's covenant of love through service. When you say "I am the Lord's" do you just use words or do you also say it with your habits, your morals and the way you love one another? Do you say it with your speech and the way you spend your money and how you

use your bodies as temples of the Holy Spirit? Do you say it with the way you observe the Lord's day, and also when it comes to the subject of having and training up children?

Isaiah 54 encouraged the Israelites to enlarge their tents predicting the expansion of the church. Well an important way the church grows is by having and training up children. Now I mentioned earlier that some worry about what the future holds for their children. Well I don't think we need to worry about that. God will continue to keep his promises to you and your children and those who are far off i.e. future generations. Many who do not know or trust the Lord put off having children for the sake of a career or convenience. Others say that the world is becoming overpopulated and so having more children is irresponsible. But this passage in Isaiah show that we need not fear what the future holds. God will take care of it.

Rather we are encouraged to keep on making that confession in both word and deed

This is our godly response as God's chosen people; to know that the Lord is God and that he is always faithful and that he richly blesses those who trust and serve Him

Amen.