Sermon Lent 3, 20th March 2022

by The Rev’d Graham Phillips

Isaiah 55

Luke 23.1-9

**God’s abundance**

This passage from Isaiah was possibly written some 30 years after the Israelites returned to Jerusalem from captivity in Babylon. They are still getting used to freedom, choosing God’s fruitfulness and abundance over scarcity. Part of their problem was their focus, their mind set. They were not used to focussing upon God’s provision, trusting in God for all their needs. They had forgotten the lessons learnt under Moses to rely on God for protection, for all their daily needs, they had forgotten that the promised land that God had led them to was a land flowing with milk and honey, a land with vines and fruit trees already placed there by God, ready for them to enjoy and benefit from.

So God speaks to the Israelite nation through the prophet Isaiah and is calling them to once again trust in his generosity and provision.

From verse one: Ho, everyone who thirsts, come to the waters - everyone thirsts, none of us can live without water, and this is especially so in a Mediterranean climate where you have to know the streams and which ones will not dry up but will always flow. Water is precious, so God ‘s invitation starts with a need that we all have - a quenching of thirst - God responds to our deepest need with provision.

God goes on “you that have no money” you the bereft people of Israel who lost everything in exile, who are struggling to rebuild the temple, the walls of Jerusalem, struggling to rebuild your lives, you who have no money, nothing, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk, without money and without price.

I will provide says God. Stop trusting in your own capacity to provide and start trusting in my capacity, my abundance. The next verses declare how often we miss the point - we spend our money, our time and energy on things which do not spiritually feed us, which do not satisfy our deep inner needs. We chase after success, we seek status and admiration from others, we place our trust in what we have in the bank account, stashed away for rainy days, for the unknown future and in the counting we forget what truly matters - our listening to God, our responding to God, our loving of God and our loving of each other, especially of those in need.

Just as God spoke these words through the prophet Isaiah to the Israelite nation some 2500 years ago, so God speaks to us in the same words. Trust in my abundance and not in your scarcity.

Genesis tells us that God created the world, the sun, the moon and all the stars by speaking. Just by voicing them he called them into being. He knows them all by name - countless billion stars in this galaxy and the next and the next. Universe upon universe. What extraordinary abundance. Can not he who turned water into wine to save a party, provide for all our needs? Can not he who fed 5000 with five loaves and two fish feed us?

Yes he can.

In 1985 i was serving in the Army in Hong Kong and I was given a word of Prophecy from God, that I would come to a crossroads and appear to lose everything that I had worked for but would gain far more. I understood this crossroads as being a decision point to leave the army. I had worked hard to get into the army, and it had been a strong desire of my father to do so. I was on a regular commission which meant that I would be expected to stay until I was 55 years old.  Yet at the age of 28 God was planting within me a call to turn away from this, to not trust worldly ways of looking at things, but to trust him.

Fifteen months later, I came to that crossroads in a very dramatic way and much to the dismay of my parents I resigned my commission and 7 weeks later was a civilian. On the surface I had lost everything. I had given up a promising career with nothing definite on the horizon. No plans, just a trust that God would guide me to the next step. Those first three months were not easy especially with my parents. But then I met Emma and within a year we were engaged and then married - I had gained far more than what I had given up. The prophecy from God was alive.

This last week Emma and I both felt independently that we should offer our home for Ukrainian refugees. On the surface it seems a ridiculous decision to make. Yes, we have plenty of room in the Rectory but as Emma wrote about last week her ME has taken a nosedive and she is struggling to keep going with all the things she does.

But we do not wish to turn from the sense of God beckoning us to say yes to the Ukrainian refugees. It may come to nothing, but there is something powerful about saying yes. It turns us from focussing upon ourselves to thinking of others, to being open to something exciting that God wants to do. Open to the unexpected, open to the generosity of God. Open to the sharing of our lives with others that will also bless us. Open to God redeeming good from a dreadful invasion. So we wait expectantly for what might unfold, and these verses from Isaiah encourage us. Just as I received abundantly far more than I could expect on following his leading to leave the army, so now we wait expectantly for what might come next, not looking at what we see, but trusting beyond that.

For as God goes on to say in verse 8:

“My thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways my ways, for as the heavens are higher than the earth, so my ways are higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts.” God always has a higher purpose which we may not understand till we get to heaven. Purposes of glory, of salvation, of redemption, of God’s kingdom breaking in.

This chapter from Isaiah finishes with a beautiful description of nature rejoicing with what God will do with the Israelite nation - “For you shall go out with joy, and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills before you shall burst into song, and the trees of the field shall clap their hands.” This is a wonderful image of the joy of creation in celebrating what God is doing in the world.

So I encourage you, seek God, come to the waters of life, look for, trust in and receive the abundance that God offers. Let his ways become your ways, and share in the joy of creation in declaring the glory of God, the presence of the Kingdom of God, the abundance of God.

Amen.