Evensong Sermon: 1 June 2025

Isaiah 44:1-8, 21-23 and Ephesians 4:7-16

May I speak in the name of the Living God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, **Amen.**

This evening, I asked our first reader, to read a few extra verses from Isaiah. The set reading for this evening is Isaiah 44:1-8, and the extra readings were from the end of the chapter, verses 21-23. This is because, when we listen to scripture is snippets, we can get a false impression of what God is trying to say. For example, when we read our lectionary selection for evening prayer, we get a beautiful message of assurance and promise. But that message is given within a wider context of accusations, forgiveness, remembering and forgetting within the preceding and following verses. And I think that the wider circumstances, gives us more meat to tuck into this evening. And the wider verses begin towards the end of the previous chapter (Isaiah 43:22 – 44:end)

Basically this chapter and a half is about Israel's sin and redemption, hinging around verse 6, where God reminds Israel that only he is their redeemer. **Thus saith the Lord the King of Israel, and his redeemer the Lord of hosts; I am the first, and I am the last; and beside me there is no God.** This is based in the Old Testament idea of the next-of-kin, who has the right to come alongside their relative and take upon themselves the debt, burden or trouble, whatever it may be, of the other individual. It is God's right and privilege as the Lord of Hosts to be the source of Israel's redemption.

Thus the wider passage begins with God's diagnosis. Israel has turned away from God, they have wearied of God and called upon other gods. Not only have they abandoned the cultic and ritualistic practices laid down by God to help them worship. Practices that were not designed to be burdensome, but as a response to divine grace which manifests itself in acts of kindness and justice. They have withheld the basic tenants of hospitality and gift giving, and are incapable of extending the simple gesture of gratitude symbolised by food.

Yet, even in the middle of pointing out their sin of lack of gratitude and thankfulness, God declares his intention not to keep in mind Israel's offences. Which is quite a commitment. Like the sun that burns off the dawn mist to transform a cool morning, to a blazing hot afternoon. God will wipe away Israel's wrongdoing like a cloud.

Thus as soon as the need is diagnosed, the remedy is identified and prescribed. First God, blots out those sins, and the he reminds Israel of his gifts to them. (Our reading this evening) The gift of life, who formed their ancestor Jacob in the womb. The gift of choice, in choosing Jacob, remained Israel to be his chosen instrument. The gift of the Spirit, pouring out blessings on Jacob's descendants, like a stream running through a dry desert. Life springing up in the grass and alongside the willow trees of the river banks. And the response to the gift of life, choice and the Spirit's blessing, is to **subscribe with his hand unto the Lord.** Literally to write God's name on your hand. The organ of personal action, symbolising a personal commitment to living an active life in the Lord.

Now we get to verse 6, our hinge verse. The purpose of these three verses, 6-8 is to announce there is only one God and nothing can stand in the way of his purposes. God is King, God is Redeemer, God is Almighty (the Lord of hosts). God in incomparable, he alone understands and was present at the beginning of time and will be there at the end of time. Thus God is not to be feared, does not the whole of Israel's story prove, that there is no God beside the God of Israel.

The next section, which we have not heard this evening, verses 9-20 essentially prove how God is incomparable, through a searing and searching examination of idolatry. A great length it simply says, 'Look at the considerable effort that is needed to make an image. Why are you so impressed by the idols made by the folk who live around you? Can't you see how silly it is to put your faith in something made by human hands? Commit yourself to me, the God who speaks and acts in your best interests.'

Lastly, we come to those three extra verses that I asked to be read, and I think it worth hearing them again. For this is where Isaiah returns to the redemption of Israel's sin.

Remember these, O Jacob and Israel; for thou art my servant: I have formed thee; thou art my servant: O Israel, thou shalt not be forgotten of me.

I have blotted out, as a thick cloud, thy transgressions, and, as a cloud, thy sins: return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.

Sing, O ye heavens; for the Lord hath done it: shout, ye lower parts of the earth: break forth into singing, ye mountains, O forest, and every tree therein: for the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.

Having reminded Israel of its own offences, and God's choice to forget about them, God now urges Israel to keep in mind its own position. That there should be no forgetting. For while sins may be forgotten, there will be no forgetting of the people of Israel on God's part. He will always remember, champion and care for them. Thus too, there should be no forgetting God on Israel's part. An exhortation, even as he says it, God knows that Israel will fail.

Yet, God still perseveres, because Israel has been chosen as God's servant. This is God's basis for his appeal to Israel, to **return unto me; for I have redeemed thee.** The logic isn't, 'return to me and you will be my servant and I will forgive you and restore you.' Rather it is even more merciful, its, 'your me servant and I am forgiving you and restoring you, so return to me'. Israel does not have to worry if will God will have them back or not. God has already forgiven and forgotten and is taking them back. A cause for celebration, that every aspect of creation, the heavens and the earth, the mountains and the trees will break forth in song, **...For the Lord hath redeemed Jacob, and glorified himself in Israel.**

Amen.

Rev'd Liz Wilson, 8 May 2025