

“WHERE IS GOD?”
Isaiah 63:5 – 64:12

For one reason and another, we decided some weeks ago that today, Advent Sunday, we'd stick to the readings in the lectionary (the suggested readings for each week that are used by many churches during the year) and I chose this Old Testament reading from among the four on offer. And because of the need to put a title for it in *Vision* well before the actual Sunday, I looked at the overall theme of the passage and grabbed at the fairly obvious “Where is God?” It's a bit of a catch-all title, really, and could go with any number of actual themes in these verses.

Since then, I've had a number of conversations with people who have asked what is going on at Wade Street Church at the moment. Where are we heading? Why are we as we are? **Where is God** in all this? (The implied answer to the latter question is that he's not involved and the church is limping along rather unspiritually without really being terribly effective.) Whatever you may think is the answer to those questions, it is always good to pause and take stock of what God is doing amongst us (should he be here at all) and where he might be leading us (assuming we are even listening to what he's saying). Those of you who've been here a while will be able to see what has happened over the past few years and how we are now living out the vision we believed God had given us. You'll also be able to point to the things that haven't worked out as we'd expected and to the shortcomings in our present life together.

We deliberately took time out this year – mainly in the first part of the year – to concentrate on our own discipleship, rather than on new projects and programmes: consolidating rather than starting a lot of new stuff. The verses which God used to speak to us about the ministry of this church back in 2002 – *Isaiah 54:2,3* – speak of “*enlarging the place of your tent*”, but also of “*strengthening the stakes*”. Having worked on the first of those things for five years, this year we have been turning our attention to the latter. But now God is leading us on, as he always does. He does not want us to stay in the same place for ever. And many people have a strong sense that we are on the cusp of something new. God is preparing us for the next instalment of his plan for Wade Street Church and our work for him here at the heart of this city. The big question for us is now “Where is God?” – a question that might be asked out of genuine curiosity, or out of a desire to move forward in his ways, or out of frustration that things are not going as we'd like them to or as we've seen them happen elsewhere or as we've seen them happen in the past.

In a very different context and experiencing very different circumstances, the people of God whom Isaiah was addressing many centuries ago were facing the same big question. It would be interesting for some of us, I'm sure, to go into all the historical and cultural background of the words we've read this morning. But I don't really want to do that. (If you're desperate, I can point you in the direction of some helpful commentaries.) I simply want us to look at what is happening here in these two chapters and see what they might have to say to us here in twenty-first century Lichfield. How has God spoken to his people in the past that might be instructive for us today? What does the prophet Isaiah have to say that speaks into our situation?

1. AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF WHAT GOD HAS DONE (63:7-9, 11-14)

The prophet begins by announcing what God has already done for his people. If you look at chapter 63, you'll see that he begins with a list of God's great deeds, the things with which he has blessed his people. Although the path has not always been smooth (which we'll come back to in a moment), God has lavished his love and grace on them. Just look at some of these things which Isaiah mentions in these verses: “*kindnesses, compassion, redemption, love, mercy, power.*” God has acted as Saviour to his people. He has rescued them from danger. He identifies with them (v9). He has guided them (vv12, 14). He has given them rest (v14). God has blessed his people in all kinds of ways with material and spiritual resources, with protection and provision and his presence. And notice again – as we are so often saying – this is not the grudging provision of a tight-fisted God. The words Isaiah chooses to use are words that speak of bounty and abundance. This is a God who blesses his people lavishly.

And we can say the same here – different people, centuries later, thousands of miles away. But we worship the same God, the God of bounty and blessing, the God who has promised us good things and provided them. We worship a God who is our Saviour and who has expressed that part of his character supremely in the person, in the death and in the resurrection of Jesus Christ. We worship a God who has provided us with amazing resources in terms of people, gifts and material things. We worship a God who has led us, clearly and excitingly, to live out a vision to serve this community and to equip and enable this congregation to live as disciples. Before we do or say anything else, we need to announce what God has done, to rejoice in and praise him for the blessings he has lavished upon us.

2. AN ACKNOWLEDGEMENT THAT THINGS GO WRONG (63:10, 17)

But, as we said a few moments ago, things don't always go smoothly where God's people are concerned. Isaiah reminds his listeners that, despite the wonderful blessings that God has showered on them, his people have a remarkable capacity for messing things up. Even as God was pouring out his blessing on them in the events surrounding the Exodus and the taking of the land he had promised them, they were rebelling against him and grieving his Holy Spirit (v10). And later on (v17) he speaks of the people wandering away from God's ways and having their hearts hardened so that they no longer give God the honour and reverence that he deserves. That has been the sorry cycle of God's people's response to him throughout the ages. The whole of the Old Testament is a tale of the people who have been chosen to receive God's special blessing turning against him and being brought back and turning again. The disciples of Jesus let him down again and again. The letters of Paul and the other New Testament writers show that those who turn to Christ can easily turn away as well.

It's still true today. We call ourselves followers of Jesus, but we fail him. We try to do what's right. We try to follow God's way. We try to keep in step with the Spirit. But we fail. We find ourselves lured away by other priorities, other gods, if you like. We find God loses his place at the top of our agenda. We are human still, and that means we make mistakes, we take the wrong decisions, we make the wrong choices – often from what we think are the best of motives – and we end up wandering away from God. The path of discipleship is not smooth, personally or collectively. We think we hear God's voice and we decide to go where it takes us, but we haven't actually taken the time to test that it really is God. We find our will gets mixed up with his and we wander from the path he has set out for us. We need to acknowledge that and recognise that things do go wrong, because without that acknowledgement, we will not be on our guard against it happening in our lives, in our life together.

3. AN AWARENESS THAT GOD HAS MORE TO GIVE (63:15, 64:2,3,12)

The people of God have wandered away from him, they have let other things take the place of God at the heart of their lives together and God has effectively let them get on with it. That has led to disasters in their national life, not least the exile to Babylon. And the people now become aware that they are not enjoying all that they could of God's blessing in their lives. The prophet questions where God's zeal and compassion and tenderness and might have gone. He has so much more to give them and they don't seem to be receiving it.

To some extent they are looking back at the things they enjoyed in the past, but they want God to act again. They want God to demonstrate his love to them again, and to do it with the kind of power that he did in the past. In 64:12 Isaiah speaks of God "*holding himself back.*" The people know that there is more there and they want God to send it their way. God always has more to give. We never ever exhaust God's ability to bless us.

And there are many of you, I know, who feel that we are missing out on some of what God has for us. However much he has blessed us in the past, he has more to pour out. We cannot, in a sense, sit back on

our laurels and just coast along. Yes, we consolidate what we have been doing and rest in God's love, but we cannot make that an excuse for not moving on in our knowledge and love of Jesus and in our desire to share that love with others around. The trouble is, there may be specific things that are preventing us receiving all that God has for us.

4. ACCEPTANCE OF THE NEED FOR FORGIVENESS AND CLEANSING (64:5-7)

Isaiah acknowledges before God that all is not well among his people, and accepts that there is a need to change. God's blessings are being withheld because of the sin of his people.

a) Continued sin (v5b)

God was angry, according to Isaiah, when his people "*continued to sin against his ways*". There were unresolved issues and attitudes in their hearts that they were unwilling to face up to and which led to constant turning against God. They had been warned time and time again by Isaiah and the other prophets that their relationship with God was all at sea, but they didn't want to do anything about it. They knew their idolatry was wrong, they knew their injustice was wrong, they knew their lifestyle was wrong, but they continued to live that way – hoping that God wouldn't notice. And as they continued to sin against God's ways, so it became easier to live like that and harder to turn round and sort it out. And in the end, God left them to it. In fact, as we've mentioned, God tried to show them the folly of their ways by allowing them to be taken off into exile. Then they started complaining that God had let them down.

We might not be in exile, but it can seem as if God is a long way away. And that can often be because of our own continued sin. We all have things in our lives which are weaknesses, points at which we may be more vulnerable to temptation than others. And we keep on giving in – to the point where we don't even realise that there's anything wrong. We might feel challenged on a particular point every now and then, we might even resolve to try and do something about it. But that sin just won't go away. We are comfortable with it. Our conscience is more or less anaesthetised on that point. One of the prayers of confession that we sometimes use asks God to forgive us "*for the sins that do not bother us because we have got used to them.*"

b) Unacceptable righteous acts (v6)

The prophet goes on to say that when we are continuing to sin, even the things we think of as righteous are unacceptable to God. In fact, that are actually abhorrent to him. "*All of us have become like one who is unclean,*" he says. There were very strict laws about uncleanness in the Torah and it was obvious that someone who was unclean was cut off from God's people – remember the things that were said in Jesus' time about those who suffered from leprosy and related illnesses. God will have nothing to do with us, says Isaiah. And what's more, all those things which we think we are doing to impress God, they are like dirty sanitary towels (which is the actual meaning of "*filthy rags*"). Nothing could be more calculated to disgust the careful Jew than that!

These righteous acts weren't righteous at all because they were being done with the wrong motive. They were being used as a mask, a façade to cover over sins and sinful attitudes that had no place among the people of God. And that has been one of the failings of God's people all through the centuries. The prophets of the Old Testament cried out against those who were trying to cover over the injustice which was ingrained in their lifestyle with a veneer of fasting and religious observance. Jesus blasted the outwardly pious religious leaders of his day for the selfishness which lay at the very root of their lifestyle, they were like whitewashed tombs with stinking corpses inside. He talked of those who came to make their offerings to God but had not sorted things out with their own brothers. Paul had to write to the Christians at Corinth to chide them for the attitudes which they harboured in their hearts even while they were sharing communion together. If the heart is not right, then the outward observance of religion is a total waste of time.

And that still holds true for today, as well. Righteous acts which are done in the wrong spirit, with the wrong attitude are anathema to God. He doesn't look at the outward show of piety put on to impress the rest of the community. He looks at the heart. Eventually that sinfulness bursts through – Isaiah says in v7c that it can have a physical effect as we “*waste away because of our sins*”. That is seen spectacularly in the fall of prominent televangelists, for example. All that outward religiosity crumbles as the sinful attitudes are exposed. In less spectacular ways we are all swept along by our sins as if by the wind (v6). All of us need constantly to be keeping a watch on our attitudes and the state of our heart, so that our seemingly righteous acts are not simply abhorrent to God.

c) No desire for God (v7)

Of course, if what Isaiah is saying is true, then we have become so accustomed to our sins that we see no need to do anything about them. And if everything seems to be trundling along nicely, then we see no need to call out to God either. So he acknowledges in v7 that no-one really calls on God, no-one “*strives to lay hold of him*”. Why? Well, it's too hurtful for us, it's too unsettling. Why do we not “*strive to lay hold of God*”? Because it's too much like hard work and we are already worn out by striving for the things that the world around us tells us to lay hold of. Why are we not concerned that God seems to be withholding greater blessing from us? Because we are happy pootling along with a few continuing sins and a lot of grimy attitudes hiding under our pious exteriors. We have become accustomed to it all: it seems to be going OK for us - but in reality we are sacrificing the best for the sake of the merely good.

5. AN ANTICIPATION OF GOD'S ACTIVITY AMONGST THEM (64:1)

And then, once those sins are dealt with, there is the anticipation of God's activity amongst them. This chapter 64 begins with an impassioned cry for God to come and work in their midst, a great “*Oh ...*” How often do our prayers begin like that? These people were desperate for things to happen. They longed to see God at work again, to stop holding himself back and get on and bless them. They anticipated the effect that God's activity would have amongst them. And once again, God did come and intervene. He liberated them from their exile. He restored their love for the Law and for his word. He used them as the vehicle for his plan of salvation for the world.

And if we want God to come down, to work amongst us here at Wade Street Church, here in the heart of this city, there needs to be the kind of turning to him that will mark us off as people who are really burning with a passion to see God at work. There is no point wallowing in our sins, no point simply beating our breasts and saying how awful we are. V8 begins with “*Yet ...*” Isaiah calls out to God on behalf of the people, and he calls on God to remember not their sins, but their standing as his much-loved people. Whatever we may have done, God is still our Father – still our Creator and Sustainer and Redeemer. And we are still his people (v9d).

The big question is, I suppose, are we ready to call out to God with that same passion? Do we really want God to “*rend the heavens and come down*”? If we're satisfied with all that's going on, fair enough – but I believe we will be missing out on God's greater blessings if we ignore his words to us. He is not necessarily going to call us to new projects and programmes, but to a new relationship with him, a renewed sense of his presence, a renewed burden for our own spiritual condition and for those around us who are lost.

It's not necessarily going to be smooth, either. Look at what Isaiah writes in 64:3 – God will do things we don't expect, “*awesome*” things. But just think how exciting it might be to be following God's plans for us, allowing him to work within us by his Holy Spirit, equipping us and encouraging us for the next stage of our journey, taking us on in our mission for him here in this city. “*Oh, that God would rend the heavens and come down!*” Is that your prayer?

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Questions for discussion

1. What good things has God done for us as a church during the past few years? Why do you think he has blessed us in these ways?
2. Should we sit back and enjoy what God has given us, or should we be moving forward? What benefits are there in "taking it easy" for a bit? What pitfalls?
3. Do we have a real passion for God to work amongst us? Why/why not?
4. What scares us about the possibility of God "*rending the heavens and coming down*"?
5. What should we be doing as a church to enable God to work amongst us?

6. Where might God be leading us next?