

WATER IN THE DESERT

Readings: Isaiah 35:1-10 & Matthew 11:2-11

You know what? I'm going to read our Isaiah reading again.

I'm going to read a paraphrase by a guy called Nathan Nettleton. He took the time to go through and rewrite the text to give it a modern voice. He's done a great job, but he also took the time to Aussieise the text. I've made a few of my own tweaks to make it more understandable here across the ditch.

I'm going to read it again, because this is what it's all about. I'll explain what I mean by that in a minute, but for now just lean back, relax, smile at your neighbour, and listen again to these words.

So here we go, Isaiah 35:1-10

**The parched and dusty land will celebrate;
the thirsty desert will be festive with trees;
blazing colours – kowhai and pohutakawa –
songs of joy as new life bursts forth.**

**The desert will be as rich as the Canterbury Plains,
as majestic as the Abel Tasman, as lush as the West Coast.
The glory of the LORD will be on display;
the splendour and magnificence of our God.**

**Are your hands trembling? Be strong!
Are your knees knocking? Stand firm!**

**Encourage those who are fearing the worst;
tell them not to give in to their fears but to hang in there.
Assure them that God is at hand;
coming to pay back oppressors what they deserve;
coming to rescue you, to set you free!**

**What a day that will be!
Eyes long blind will open to colour and light!
Ears long deaf will hear music and laughter!
Legs long paralysed will dance like fantails!
Tongues long tied will sing like the tui!**

**For reviving rains will fall on dry dusty land,
and rivers will flow in the desert.
Wasteland full of scrub and broom will become inland lakes,
and cool water will gush up between volcanic rocks.
Water birds will flock where only tussock grew,
and soft fruits will grow where only gorse survived.**

**There will be a new highway
known as 'The One and Only True Way'.**

**The corrupt will not be allowed access,
for only God's people may travel it;
and on this road, no one – not even a complete idiot –
could ever lose their way.**

**There will be no hidden dangers along the road;
no cold fronts sweeping in.
Nothing threatening will be found there,
so those God has put right may walk in safety.**

**Those who the LORD has bailed out will come home;
they will sing as they travel to God's sacred mountain.
The smiles will never leave their faces again;
laughter and contentment will be theirs to keep,
and misery and despair will be made redundant.**

**A this time of year we're all looking forward to Christmas and holidays. Summers full
of fun, beaches, camping, travel, and copious food.**

**Life's pretty good here at any time, but we feel particularly Christmassy at this time of
year with the long days, the warm weather, the school holidays just around the bend
and all the nice little ceremonies and rituals we get up to this time of year. The office
party, the community group end of year suppers, the carol singing and the final school
assembly.**

**But there are plenty of people who aren't able to look forward to this time of year as
much as we can.**

**People who have lost someone, or live in poverty, or in a war-torn area. People who are
strangers in their community - immigrants and refugees. People who don't fit in, people
who are damaged in some way - physically or emotionally.**

**And it's especially for such people that Isaiah promises that massive list of amazing
things, when God establishes his kingdom on earth. Good news indeed!**

**This message is especially for "those who are of a fearful heart". "Fearful of heart" is a
reasonable translation, but if you translate the Hebrew literally it's for "ones whose
hearts are racing"**

**Stressed, scared, anxious, fearful of the future? Heart racing, thoughts churning? This
message is for you.**

It's a down-to-earth body message too. Just look at all the body parts that pop up:

**hands, knees, heart, eyes, ears, tongues, heads. It's a message for humanity in all our
hairy, fleshy, squishiness.**

What do YOU think of when you hear Isaiah talking about deserts?

Deserts aren't productive. Sand isn't a good place to grow things... Appleby is a good place to grow things, but deserts aren't.

And when humans venture into deserts, they have to either be extremely well prepared or go armed some serious know-how. Deserts are killers.

And I got to thinking how when we're stuck in a non-productive state how much it feels like a desert. When we know that nothing is growing, and all our good stuff is withering under a relentless sun. How do we find our way out, and will life ever return to this wasteland?

If this is true for us, how much more so for people stuck in refugee camps, or living in the bombed out shell of what was once a beautiful city. Or people stuck in wheelchairs, or abusive relationships, or sick-beds. Can anyone get us out of the desert?

What a day it will be when God returns to the earth and makes it all new!

All of today's readings, in some way or another, bring us back to considering what the "kingdom of God" will be like. The view of scripture is one that has been characterized as "the kingdom is now, and not yet;" there are characteristics of God's kingdom that are part of our lived experience (especially as we seek to live them out.) And yet, we realize that the fullness of God's kingdom is not yet come. There is something that we are still waiting for. So what things that you we identify that are (partially, at least) part of our world — and what things are "not yet?"

And contemplating the "Not Yet" is where the doubt creeps in for me. It's been 2000 years. How long do we have to wait?

And don't worry if you too feel that way from time to time. You're in some illustrious company. Doubt is a common thread running through the bible, and it's not always portrayed as a bad thing. The disciple we dismissively call "Doubting Thomas" was indeed sceptical about the fact the other disciples had seen their dead friend, but John also makes it clear that once Thomas encountered the resurrected and very much alive again Jesus, he was the first disciple to really, actually, properly get it! He's at the climax of John's gospel. He was the first to understand right down in his guts who Jesus truly was.

Hey, There were even disciples who doubted their way through the entire great commission.

In our gospel reading this morning it was poor old John the Baptist who is struck with some doubts. And looking at his situation, I think we'd all be willing to cut him some slack!

John has dedicated his life to preparing the way for the Messiah. And I do mean his life. He's given up everything. He's lived out in the wilderness, wearing animal skins, eating what he can forage and scaring children with his beard.

He's spoken out against authority and offended the comfortable and wealthy with his talk of what will happen to the them once God arrives to sort them out. He's looking

forward very much to the exact things we enjoyed dreaming about in our Isaiah reading.

And true to form the Messiah has arrived! John even had the privilege of baptising him.

And then ... nothing.

No overturning of society, no flame-throwers in parliament, no getting rid of the Roman overlords. There's talk of miracles, sure, but not like the stuff in Isaiah.

In the gospel reading, John is sitting in jail, perhaps with too much time on his hands and too much silence. Doubts and uncertainties begin to take hold in his mind and grow. If we were to look back at the story of the day he had baptised Jesus, he seemed to be in no doubt then about who Jesus was, but now as he sits in his cell, he's not so sure. Jesus hasn't been quite the sort of messiah he'd been expecting. The arrival of this messiah on the scene has not turned the world upside down in quite the way he had imagined. Maybe he'd been wrong about Jesus. Maybe he'd misread the signs. So next time he has visitors, he sends them off to Jesus with a question: "Are you the one we've been waiting for or should we be looking out for someone else?"

His friends found Jesus, and put John's question to him. Jesus sent them back to John with a message. we're not told what John made of the reply!

Jesus tells John's followers to go back and just tell John what they've seen - deaf people hearing, blind people seeing, lame people walking and the dead raised to life, sick healed, the poor receive good news. All signs straight out of Isaiah!

And then Jesus addresses the crowd. John was indeed the real deal. Jesus even calls him the greatest ever prophet. And that means that Jesus himself is the real deal.

So why not get stuck in and do the Messiah thing like everyone was expecting? When the Messiah comes the desert is supposed to burst into flower, the weak will be made strong, the poor will have plenty, peace and harmony will break out to such an extraordinary extent that even the snakes and lions will be harmless. And what's more, the Messiah will see to it that those who have oppressed and abused the people will get back what deserve in full.

I don't know about you, but despite the fact that my life isn't so bad, I can relate to the agonised uncertainty of John's question.

I can relate to it when I see greed, corruption and selfishness continuing to hold sway over the lives of ordinary people.

I can relate to it, when I wonder why the love of Christ hasn't so transformed our nation that it would be unthinkable for us to have 30% of our kids hungry and living in cold, overcrowded houses.

I can relate to it when I read visions of world peace with swords being turned into ploughshares and lions lying down with lambs, and then I visit a news site and there are articles about Syria.

“Jesus, are you the one we’ve been waiting for or should we be looking out for someone who can make a bigger difference?”

Actually, I think there are signs all around us that this process has begun. Little things, not giant sweeping changes. Like Jesus's message to John, we need to look around us and identify the windows through which we can glimpse God's kingdom.

And I also firmly believe that we all have our own part to play in bringing some of these Isaiah changes about.

Reflect of some of the projects currently running. Things we've done as a church, or that some of our people are involved in. Think of the good budgeting advice, the mentoring, the food delivered, the visiting, the kids with smiles, the cups of tea (have I mentioned how much I like a good cup of tea?). The nice Christmas lunch.

That's us. We're out there helping to bring about that sort of transformation in our communities.

Jesus started it off in spectacular form, but the process continues thorough us - WE can be the water in the desert!

But not in a huge, operation Desert Storm kind of way. No bombing runs, deployed weapons and overthrowing of the current regime. Much more like followers of the kind of person who is born in a shed, attended by some guys fresh out of the paddocks. Like Tracy Chapman's song, this revolution sounds like a whisper.

I really hope that for John it was the reassuring news he was waiting for as he faced his execution.

Jesus had ultimate respect and high praise for John, but he pointed John — and us — to the things that God was doing through him and his disciples as evidence of God’s kingdom.

What exactly do we think of when we pray, “Your kingdom come and your will be done, on earth as it is in heaven?” Does it look like the things Isaiah is describing?

During these weeks leading up to Christmas, a season that the Christian church calls Advent, the stories of Jesus are centre stage.

Or at least they should be.

The reality is that the Jesus story too frequently gets drowned out. The commercialised stories of Christmas have very little “Christ” in them.

In the last week or so I received a letter addressed to Mrs Karl Summerfield, from a supermarket chain. The little card promised me "more great reasons to love Christmas". I opened it slowly and expectantly. What were they offering? I was really hoping it would be recovery of sight for the blind and stuff, but it turned out it was just a whole load of junk they wanted me to buy.

Fortunately, the Jesus story challenges the mundane and self-aggrandising tendencies of our world and invites us to embrace an audacious hope for a world where the blind DO receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them.

A world of productive deserts, safe places and easy navigation.

This is why I said that our Isaiah reading is what it's all about. This is central to our faith. Through us, God is at work in our world, slowly transforming the deserts into lush bush. Bringing the kingdom about in a person to person kind of way.

This is why we are celebrating - don't let it get drowned out this year!

Let's pray:

God bless you, my friends.

May the seasons of your life be held in love.

May your winters be short and your summers long.

**May smiles pour upon you, warm like the sun
and may your tears refresh like the rain.**

**May your garden flower abundantly
sweetening your neighbourhood,
and may your roses always bloom larger
than their thorns.**

God bless you my friends.

**May your wisdom increase like a deep rooted tree
and may peace always nest in its branches
to sing to you above the noise of storms.**

**May you always see yourself
in God's plan for a blossoming earth,
and may the fragrance of your truth
be a celebration for all.**

God bless you my friends.