

Father, may these spoken words be faithful to your written word and lead us to the living Word, Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen

Today is the beginning of a new church year, the beginning of Advent; that time of expectation as we prepare to celebrate the coming of Jesus into the world, and also to look ahead to his final coming as judge at the end of time. Today we are going to think about Isaiah's prophetic words.

"The word that Isaiah the son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." You notice "saw" not "heard." How can a word from God be seen by Isaiah? Even the technology minded amongst us understand that this can't be an allusion to texting, tweeting or emailing. So, what does Isaiah mean? The Hebrew word for "see" means "to envision." We are meant to realise that God has given Isaiah a vision. Maybe in a dream. Maybe in a trance. However it was given, it is a word from the Lord.

According to William Glasser, an American psychiatrist, we learn 10% of what we read, 20% of what we hear, 30% of what we see, so 50% of what we see and hear sticks with us. What God says to Isaiah is really important and ought to be remembered so perhaps that's why Isaiah uses the word 'saw'. Jesus knew this same theory; that is why his discourses were laced with imagery and filled with examples; that is why he pointed to the temple and put children on his lap. Like Isaiah, we need to see and hear and live the Word of God. It is important and needs to be remembered.

So we return to "The word that Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem." In chapter 1 Isaiah graphically laid out what he had seen: violence, bribery, unfaithfulness, desolation, trampling on the poor. There are brief interruptions as God calls for repentance and offers glimpses of hope, but they are drowned out by these pictures of violence and rebellion.

Then Chapter 2 opens as though Isaiah is starting all over again -- or God is. What Isaiah sees is not taking place now, but 'in the last days.' People of every nation will stream to Mt. Zion, including those who were enemies of Israel and Judah. God's instruction will go forth from Jerusalem; God will judge between the nations. The people will be transformed by this teaching.

What Isaiah saw was 'concerning Judah and Jerusalem'. We need to understand the historical setting. Our passage from the Book of Isaiah comes from around 740 BC. At that time Assyria was threatening to overrun Syria and Palestine. The Northern Kingdom of Israel had formed a coalition with neighbouring nations in

order to repel Assyria. They had asked the Southern Kingdom of Judah to join them. Isaiah had warned against such military coalitions, and instead called on the people to trust in God. He called the people to look to Mount Zion and the temple as symbols of their salvation.

What Isaiah saw was not for his days or the near future. Rather, Isaiah's vision concerned "the last days". "The last days" allude to the Messianic age; the time between the two comings of Christ. In other words, what Isaiah saw concerns Christ and today. What Isaiah saw was an advent message that includes you and me and the times that we live in. But Isaiah is not talking about a literal temple on a literal mountain.

So if he's not talking about a literal temple on a literal mountain, what is He talking about? What is His advent message for you and me and everyone who believes in Jesus? To find out we need to back track for a moment and remind ourselves of the place and function of mountains in the history of redemption.

The mountain is a place of salvation. In Genesis chapter nine, Noah's ark came to rest on Mt. Ararat after the flood. It was there, on the mountain, that God made a covenant with Noah to never again destroy the earth with a flood. The mountain is a place of salvation.

In Genesis chapter twenty-two, at the command of God, Abraham was about to plunge down the knife and offer up Isaac at Mt. Moriah. But God stopped him and provided a ram to offer up in Isaac's place. The mountain is a place of salvation.

In Exodus chapter 3, at Mt. Horeb with its burning bush Moses was commissioned to go to Egypt to lead God's people out of bondage. The mountain is a place of salvation.

In Exodus chapter twenty, it was on Mt. Sinai that God revealed His Law and His ways to His people. Obedience to this Law meant life whereas disobedience meant death. The mountain is a place of salvation.

The temple was built on Mt. Zion the same mountain on which Abraham offered up Isaac. The mountain is a place of salvation.

Jesus, of course, was crucified on Golgotha. All other mountains point to this mountain. It is in Christ and because of Christ that the mountain is a place of salvation. So in our Old Testament reading Isaiah reminds us what it is all for;

our salvation secured in God's precious gift of his Son, that gift that we anticipate over the next four weeks.

Although the centre of these verses is the vision of the Lord's house, restored to its proper focal position atop the mountain, our eyes are drawn to the people streaming towards the holy mountain. What are they looking for? Why have they come? They are, apparently, people who are sick of war and who know that they have lost any ability to judge whether or not the fight is just. They long for an arbiter, they long for peace and above all they long to learn a new way of living. They are people who have learned the hard way the cost of wrong choices, and now they ache to be taught, to be prepared for a different world. They too have come to recognise the mountain as a place of salvation.

But Isaiah's own longing is revealed in the last verse of this reading. 'O house of Jacob,' he pleads 'come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.' Surely he begs, we can see what God is offering? If even the nations, who have not known God, can look to him and see him as their heart's desire, surely we who are his people can admit that this is the way of life. Indeed perhaps the two are connected. Perhaps if we, God's people, prepare ourselves to walk in his light, we will make the path plain for others who are lost and longing. Or is it, much to our shame, sometimes the other way round? Perhaps the desperate, those utterly despairing of the world they know, lead us, who are supposed to be God's people, to his path?

In verse five Isaiah says, 'O house of Jacob, come ye, and let us walk in the light of the Lord.' Let us pray that as we wait in expectation this Advent season that we will discern God's will for each one of us; how we might walk in his light and bring that light into our world where so many live in despair because of loneliness, poverty and injustice. In Jesus' name. Amen.