

Notes from Sermon given by Ian Stackhouse - Sunday December 3rd 2006 Isaiah 7

In the 8th century BC Isaiah, from a well-to-do dynasty, was the court prophet, and was charged with keeping the King in line by bringing the word of the Lord. King Ahaz was worried because of the news that armies to the north in Israel and Aram were plotting to take Judah, because Jerusalem had refused to come in with them in an alliance to take on the Assyrian Empire to the north. They wanted to take Judah in order to protect themselves against the local superpower, Assyria. King Ahaz was fearful and was checking the water supplies in the aqueduct, and concerned because Jerusalem was strategically very vulnerable as it was situated in a basin surrounded by hills. So Ahaz is wondering about siding with Assyria in order to protect Judah from Aram and Israel. This would involve Ahaz in compromise because he would have to bow before and give homage to the King of Assyria, but he needed protection so he believed this might be a way to obtain it.

Isaiah has a message for Ahaz – these two kings of Aram and Israel are 'smouldering stumps of wood'; in other words bits of charcoal! Rezin is only king of Damascus and Pekah only king of Samaria. In 65 years, he says, all of this will have disappeared. They are nothing. To a King who is thinking of selling out to the Assyrians, he says 'don't panic!', 'do not fear!' Be careful to do nothing. Trust God. Jerusalem is where it is with all its vulnerability so that you will learn to trust Him. If you are not firm in our faith, you will not stand. Isaiah hoped that the King would heed this word, but knew that he would not. If Pekah is king of Samaria and Rezin king of Damascus, does it make no difference that David's son is king of Jerusalem? Is the security of God's people achieved in the same way as that of other nations? Do we wage war like other nations? These are real issues, real politics, - can you rely on God?

Ahaz looked to more spectacular solutions, looked to a superpower. How like the Church! We have statistics of young people leaving the Church in their thousands, and so we feel we have to come up with a new thing in order to cause the Kingdom of God to survive. We are in personal crisis, perhaps with job loss, or we are lonely because we are not married, so we jump to a quick solution. 'Be careful to do nothing – in quietness and trust'. But this does not mean passivity. Doing nothing can be the most faith-filled thing to do, rather than a so-called quick-fix that can lead to misery.

The Lord speaks to Ahaz, and offers him a sign, which he refuses to receive saying piously that he will not put the Lord to the test, and puts his trust in Assyria instead. So the Lord gives him a sign 'a virgin shall be with child', which is a judgement on his faithlessness. What tries God's patience the most is not trusting Him. When this child reaches the age of discretion this land will be devastated by the Assyrian invasion. But this is also a sign of faithfulness and promise, because by the time we get to Isaiah 9, this child has become Messiah, who will rescue them from judgement and captivity. All down the following centuries with different invasions by different empires, there has been a longing for a King to come to this barren wasteland. In Matthew 1 a young woman is found to be with child, and the prophecy of Isaiah 7:14 is fulfilled. The prophecy was initially for those in 8th century BC, but the early Christians saw that these prophecies seemed to fit Jesus perfectly.

But this child will die and bear the weight of our sins, but comes through to resurrection so that we can live our lives in the fulfilment of this prophecy. Jesus was not simply a prophet, but very God has come. In Judaism He is the 'above-us God', and in Islam also: He can send angels, prophets, words, but Allah is too holy to come down. This is blasphemy to Moslems that God has associated Himself with that which is less than Himself. For God to touch the earth is, in Islam, called shirk.

This shows us how remarkable it is that Christians worshipped God who is so great that he wanted to come to us, the 'with us-God'. This is the 'Great Stoop', the 'Great Condescension', the 'Great Condensation', when God became a little human. In His grace God offers us the best Christmas gift of Jesus who gives us new life, a new beginning, the forgiveness of sins, and the power of a Risen Life.