

Reading: Isaiah 55 v1-13

¹“Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters;

and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.

² Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labor on what does not satisfy?

Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.

³ Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.

I will make an everlasting covenant with you, my faithful love promised to David.

⁴ See, I have made him a witness to the peoples, a ruler and commander of the peoples.

⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not, and nations you do not know will come running to you because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendor.”

⁶ Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near.

⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts.

Let them turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

⁸ “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways declares the LORD.

⁹ “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow come down from heaven and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater,

¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

¹² You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands.

¹³ Instead of the thornbush will grow the juniper, and instead of briars the myrtle will grow. This will be for the LORD’s renown, for an everlasting sign, that will endure forever.”

Teaching

It is hard to believe that it is sixteen weeks since we last met together in Christ Church and St John's. While we all hope that we will be able to physically get together soon, it has been a real blessing over lockdown to have remote church services, to gather in our own homes, while we jointly worship our God. It is a real blessing for me to be here today and to share with you.

One of the effects that lockdown has had on people is that many of us have gone a little bit stir crazy. I am all too aware that the journey over the line of "crazy" is shorter for some people than others, and individual circumstances come into play. I have been very fortunate in continuing to work through all of lockdown, but many people, including Lorraine, have been in the house, looking at the same four walls for a very long time. Seeing the same family members, even when they are as adorable as I am, adds to the stress.

At one point, Lorraine decided she had had enough. I had taken a day off, and Lorraine announced that we were going to go for a long walk. Options were limited at that point, so beaches and forest parks were off the table, but Lorraine doesn't do things by halves. We set out from the Mill Road, up through Ballyclare, out the Victoria Road to Ballyeaston, then across to the Church Road and down past Christ Church into Ballynure. That was the day where we recorded our "Welcome" for the start of the Church services. We got to Ballynure. Now, as you all know, the weeks of tight lockdown were glorious weather. We had walked a fair distance, and we were hot. We didn't have any drinks with us, so we went to the garage in Ballynure and bought some bottled water. Nothing tastes better than cold water on a hot day when you're feeling parched. That refreshed us, and we carried on along the Templepatrick Road and home.

The passage today is an amazing invite for anyone who, like us, is experiencing thirst. It is for everyone who is parched and in need of refreshment. God, through Isaiah, gives us the invitation to “come to the waters”.

Water is mentioned many times throughout Scripture. Right back in Genesis 1 the Holy Spirit hovers over the face of the waters, the blank slate of God’s creation. God purifies the Earth of evil people in the Flood. In Exodus God uses the waters of the Red Sea to protect the Israelites but to destroy their oppressors. Psalm 23 – He leads me beside still waters, Psalm 46 – Mountains fall into the sea, yet there is a river which makes glad the city of God. Jesus is baptised in the waters of the Jordan, and at the very end of Scripture we read of the River of Life flowing through Heaven.

Water is a common theme. But way better than just water, God promises here that he will give us free upgrades! Milk and wine are also on offer.

Lockdown has also opened up a number of new ways for people to do their shopping. My parents, and many others who have been shielding, have taken to online shopping like ducks to water! Click and collect, online ordering, waiting for Asda delivery slots are now commonplace and Amazon delivery drivers are probably more familiar to us than many family members. The one common theme that all of these systems have is that payment is required. It could be by credit or debit card, paypal or even potentially cash, but all of the services need money. Not so with the Lord.

This call in Isaiah is to come freely, and to come without money or cost. It’s open to everyone, nobody is excluded from joining, and there are even free upgrades – as well as water there is free milk, and wine. Verse 2 – Listen, listen to me and eat what is good, and your soul will delight in the richest of fare.

The thirsty, poor people who accept this invitation are going to be very well treated indeed.

Why?

God made a covenant with King David, and he wants to extend that out to other people and other nations – vv 3-5. It's hard for us to understand why God wants to do this. Why would he bother? There are many questions about the nature of God which are difficult to answer. My belief is that we won't get all of the answers we want until we reach heaven, simply because our human minds and bodies lack the capacity to comprehend and infinite God as he truly is. God gives us a very gentle explanation of his nature here. V8 "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares the LORD, "as the heavens are higher than the earth so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

We can be sure, however, that God wants to have a relationship with us, he pours his blessings out on us, and he loves us more passionately than we can imagine.

Verse 10 returns to water – this time as snow and rain. Water does not come down from heaven without watering the earth, and making it bud and flourish, providing seed and food.

Here in Northern Ireland we are usually very blessed with an adequate supply of rain. Even this year, with more sunshine than I can ever remember, has not completely emptied the rivers and reservoirs. Use your imagination now and put yourself in Israel – a dry, desert country.

Many years ago I did some short term missionary work in Niger, just above the Northern border of Nigeria. It was the bottom edge of the Sahara desert. I arrived on the 3rd of July, and everyone was very anxious as the rains hadn't come. The drive from the capital to the hospital I was working in was through dry, dusty, barren fields, with an occasional leafless tree. The rains needed to arrive by 9th July, or the harvest would fail and there would be famine. Everyone was praying, and the most intense thunderstorm blew in on 8th July. People

did not die, because they had water. My drive back to the capital three months later was through a tunnel of 8-10 foot high plants of millet and sorghum, corn, past mango trees loaded with fruit. Water transformed a barren wasteland into a place of green pastures and blessing.

God sends his word out. He does it through church, where we can meet, physically or by youtube. He does it through people who reach out to their neighbours to show love and compassion. He does it through social media, for example Arlene has posted an encouraging post on the St John's worship group whatsapp every day of lockdown, and thank you Arlene for your faithful encouraging ministry in hard times. God speaks in ways that we will never appreciate this side of Heaven. But he speaks. People hear, and they need to respond.

People are hurting, lonely and lost. They thirst for something to bring relief, comfort and purpose. It may be that the calls they are hearing from God are not in a format they fully understand, but they know they need him. Perhaps today you are one of those people. Perhaps you have never known God, or perhaps your relationship with him has dwindled over the years. Perhaps you are walking faithfully with him, but like walkers on a hot day you build up more a thirst which needs to be quenched. All of us, very much including me, need to approach the Lord regularly and drink of the free water he offers. njk

What are the results?

Verses 12 and 13 – When you drink the free water, milk and wine offered by God, you will go out in joy. There hasn't been an awful lot of joy in the world over the last months. You will be led forth in peace – peace and rest have likewise been in short supply. The mountains and hills will break forth in song – you will have a new appreciation of how wonderfully God has created, loved and redeemed us.

Pine trees, useful for building, and myrtle, used for medicine and healing, will replace thorns and brambles, which only take up space.

Drinking the water God supplies transforms a person's life far more profoundly than the change from desert to farmland I witnessed in Niger.

How then can we get this water?

I'm going to go back a wee bit to verses 6 and 7

Seek the LORD while he may be found;

Call on him while he is near

Let the wicked forsake his way, and the evil man his thoughts.

Let him turn to the LORD and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

The way to access this refreshing, cleansing water, to be brought to a new place of forgiveness and healing, is simply to ask for it. God doesn't make it difficult. There are no barriers, no payments, no queues, no need to do something. You simply ask. It is a prayer to God, asking him to take control of your life, to turn you from the dry, thirsty desert that is life without him to the watered ground that is life in Christ.

If you are feeling thirsty, if you need to encounter God in a new way, or for the first time, please get in touch with Johnny, Dianne, or me and we will be very happy to talk to you