

Brisbane's Tattersall's Club has only allowed its membership to be male for the last 153 years. Last year the members voted and decided that women should be allowed to join. The last time the club voted on the issue was 12 years ago when the motion was rejected. Royal Aberdeen Golf Club in Scotland voted to allow women members for the first time in 238 years. There are still a few golf clubs in Scotland that are men only. These are exclusive clubs. Membership is tightly controlled and especially there are no women.

In Isaiah's time Israel was like an exclusive club. They were God's chosen people, descendants of Abraham. The only way a foreigner could become one of God's people was by becoming part of Israel. Even in Jesus' time the world was divided into two: Jews and Gentiles; God's people and pagans. In the temple there was an outer courtyard for Gentiles. There was a wall dividing this off from the rest of the temple. At the wall there were warnings telling them not to go beyond. Some of these stones have been found with this message: *"No foreigner may enter within the balustrade around the sanctuary and the enclosure. Whoever is caught, on himself shall he put blame for the death which will ensue."*

But God has opened the door to all peoples. Throughout Isaiah there is an emphasis on all nations coming to be God's people.

In the vision in Chapter 2:

³ *Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the temple of the God of Jacob. He will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths." The law will go out from Zion, the word of the Lord from Jerusalem. (2:3)*

⁶ *On this mountain the Lord Almighty will prepare a feast of rich food for all peoples, a banquet of aged wine— the best of meats and the finest of wines. ⁷ On this mountain he will destroy the shroud that enfolds all peoples, the sheet that covers all nations. (25:6-7)*

God's Servant will be a light to the nations:

"Here is my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen one in whom I delight; I will put my Spirit on him, and he will bring justice to the nations.

⁴ *he will not falter or be discouraged till he establishes justice on earth. In his teaching the islands will put their hope."*

⁶ *"I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness; I will take hold of your hand. I will keep you and will make you to be a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles." (42:1, 4, 6)*

"It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles that my salvation may reach to the ends of the earth." (49:6)

These words refer to God's Servant who will die to save people from their sin in Chapter 53. This salvation is for all peoples.

Our reading today opened door to foreigners & eunuchs.

³ *Let no foreigner who is bound to the Lord say,
"The Lord will surely exclude me from his people."
And let no eunuch complain, "I am only a dry tree."*

⁴ *For this is what the Lord says:*

"To the eunuchs who keep my Sabbaths, who choose what pleases me and hold fast to my covenant—

⁵ *to them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters;*

I will give them an everlasting name that will endure forever. (Isaiah 56:3-5)

Eunuchs had been explicitly excluded from worship.

No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord.
(Deuteronomy 23:1)

But now God says:

*To them I will give within my temple and its walls
a memorial and a name better than sons and daughters. (Isaiah 56:5)*

Of course eunuchs couldn't have children to preserve family name. But God will give them a special place and memorial among his people.

There is one eunuch that we remember from the New Testament. Do you remember the Ethiopian Eunuch in Acts? He became part of God's people by trusting Jesus. What part of the Bible was he reading? It was Isaiah! It must have been a special book for him promising him salvation.

And foreigners will be welcomed by God also.

⁶ *And foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord
to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord,
and to be his servants,*

*all who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it
and who hold fast to my covenant—*

⁷ *these I will bring to my holy mountain
and give them joy in my house of prayer.*

Their burnt offerings and sacrifices

will be accepted on my altar; for my house will be called a house of prayer for all nations." (56:3-7)

These last words were quoted by Jesus when cleansed temple. *"My house will be called a house of prayer for all nations."* (Mark 11:17) God will welcome all peoples into his presence. All who trust in Jesus.

God even says:

²¹ *And I will select some of them also to be priests and Levites," says the Lord.*

²² *"As the new heavens and the new earth that I make will endure before me," declares the Lord, "so will your name and descendants endure."²³ From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me," says the Lord. (66:21-23)*

If Israel was an exclusive club the priests and Levites were even more exclusive. To be a priest you had to show you were descended from Levi through the clan of Aaron. Your pedigree had to be

impeccable. Only priests could go into the inner rooms of the temple. But in God's kingdom it would open for people from other nations to be priests and Levites. They would be acceptable in the inner sanctums of God's presence.

Through Jesus we can all come into God's presence. We can know that we are fully accepted, welcomed. That is great news isn't it??

2. Welcoming others

But we have to go one step further. If we are welcomed like this we must welcome others also. We must accept all sorts of people into the fellowship of God's people.

That can be hard sometimes. People may come from a different culture than ours. They may not speak our language well. They may dress differently, have tattoos everywhere, have body piercing or other things we think strange. They may make us feel uncomfortable. But we need to reflect the welcome that God has shown us.

We need to make sure that we don't exclude people by the way we do things. Like when churches ran services in Latin and no one understood it. We need to make sure our traditions don't alienate people but rather make it easy for them to hear the gospel. Some churches have services in Mandarin or Korean or other languages. All churches can't do that. But we can provide special ministries to reach different groups: children, youth, elderly, ESL, and so on.

3. How will the nations come to God?

There is a hymns that says,

"I cannot tell how He will win the nations,
How He will claim His earthly heritage,
How satisfy the needs and aspirations
Of east and west, of sinner and of sage."

How will God do it? How will he draw other nations into his kingdom? Isaiah gives us some clues as to how.

We have had many holidays camping. It is great sitting out around fire at night. One problem is that our gas light attracts 1000s of moths. The table becomes littered with dead moths. They are attracted by the light. Isaiah talks about God's people being a light to the nations.

*"Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord rises upon you.*

²*See, darkness covers the earth
and thick darkness is over the peoples,
but the Lord rises upon you and his glory appears over you.*

³*Nations will come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.
... for he has endowed you with splendour. (60:1-3, 9)*

They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord for the display of his splendour. (61:3)

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 splendour. (55:5)

We are called to be a light to nations. Jesus also says, “*You are the light of the world.*” (Matthew 5:14) Our transformed lives, individually and as a church together, are God’s way of attracting the nations to him. How we live is of great significance in winning the nations. We can see what enormous damage to the work of the gospel is cause by child abuse in the church. The reputation of the church is damaged but so is God’s mission to all people. Our love for each other and for those around is a powerful witness.

What we do is a witness but so is what we say. Isaiah says,
How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring good news, who proclaim peace, who bring good tidings, who proclaim salvation, who say to Zion, “Your God reigns!” (52:7)

There has to be a verbal message. The good news must be told.

Finally we read:

I will send some of those who survive to the nations—to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations. (66:19)

God sends us to proclaim the gospel to our own community and some he sends to other parts of the world. We can’t all go overseas but we have a responsibility to support those who do go - our mission partners. We need to think about how we pray, how we financially support them and encourage them.

God called Abraham. He said he and his descendants would be a blessing to all peoples. But Israel failed to be the servant of the Lord. They failed to attract the nations. God then sent his Son as Servant to be a light to the nations. He was faithful where Israel failed.

Now God sends us - we are to be a light to the nations.