

Isaiah 2 Sermon

I wonder if anyone remembers this ad campaign? “We've poured you a beer. We've shampooed the camels. We've turned on the lights. We've got the sharks out of the pool. And we've been rehearsing for 40,000 years. So” - as the censored version in Japan, Korea and the UK went - “where are you?” About six years ago, some bright spark at Tourism Australia thought that showing people from overseas pictures of beaches and the outback, and casually swearing at them would get them to come and visit us. It was memorably bad. But interestingly enough it is in fact kind of a good question for a Christian to ask themselves. Yes, I know you are in a comfy chair, in a church in Waitara, in Australia, planet Earth and all that. But let me ask: where are you in relation to God?

Not in a “how is your relationship with God going” sort of way, which is what Bruce was talking about last week, but I'm asking what does it look like on an everyday level. Is your relationship with God shaped the right way?

Just have a think about that for a moment and then hold that thought, because I'll come back to that in a sec. What I'm going to do first, though, is explain how prophecy actually works, because if we don't understand this, then we can fall into traps like thinking it tells the future sort of like a horoscope, that this figure must be Jesus, and this time they're talking about must be now, and the bad guy must be the Pope, that sort of stuff. So what prophecy does is this: prosecute, plead and predict, *in that order*. Firstly, prosecute: basically, this is the prophets saying, “This is how you're screwing up.” Secondly, plead: of course, after telling the people how they've failed to be the people of God, the prophet tells them how they can fix their predicament, basically, “Turn back to God and do what he told you.” Lastly, predict: this is the prophet explaining what will be the consequences of the people either turning to God or not.

Last week, in chapter 1, we heard a fair bit about what had been going wrong – not following God, oppressing the marginalised, unfaithfully worshipping God – but mostly today we're going to be focussing on the predict part in chapter 2: what happens when God says enough is enough.

Let's look back at our text.

2:10 Go into the rocks, hide in the ground from dread of the LORD and the splendor of his majesty! 11 The eyes of the arrogant man will be humbled and the pride of men brought low; the LORD alone will be exalted in that day. 12 The LORD Almighty has a day in store for all the proud and lofty, for all that is exalted (and they will be humbled)

God arises in great power and majesty to terrify the earth because of the terrible idolatry and injustice that's everywhere. People are so petrified that they run for cover in caves and holes in the ground. Even those precious little gods they had made with their hands get chucked into holes where unclean animals live as they scramble for cover. If Judah thought being attacked by their neighbours was bad, that's nothing compared to what it will be like when God decrees his great 'no' against human sinfulness. What, you didn't think it would ever happen? You thought you could just carry on and nothing would matter?

Now, one of the many really cool things about the Old Testament, and the prophets in particular, is key phrases. If you keep them in mind when you're reading through, they open up an huge load of meaning for the passage. Two of them appear here. First of all, what we've got here in the English as LORD Almighty or Lord of Hosts, in verse 12: Yahweh Tsavoth, Yahweh of Armies. This talks about the mighty God who waged holy war in judgment against those who stood in opposition to his will, but also the covenant God who promised great blessings if his people were obedient, but also great calamities – culminating in exile – if they were not. The second to keep an eye out for is

“in that day”, in verse 11. This means the time both when God saves and when he judges. But most of all it is when God brings history its culmination. In that day, God wins, finally and forever.

Hence the question that Isaiah is asking Judah here: “Stop trusting in mere humans, who have but a breath in their nostrils. Why hold them in esteem?” See, Ahaz, who was king of Judah at the time, was sending emissaries to Assyria to help against attacks by his northern neighbours. But Isaiah makes it clear that it's all rubbish. Idols, wealth, military superiority, any possible achievement anyone might have made, it's not going to help. Turn to God. You have a history that speaks of victory after victory after victory won by God. That's the sort of power that you could have backing you. But you think you can do it on your own, you and your little friends? God is the one to trust because *God is the one who matters*. What they were doing was not taking God seriously for who God is. They were taking him for granted for who they thought he was.

Consider the film clip that we saw at the beginning from Lord of the Rings (<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4Yy0pPTrHlk>). There was Bilbo, so caught up in his idolatry and possession of the Ring of Power that Gandalf's warnings were seen by him as jealousy and meddling rather than the good intentions of a close friend. More than this, though, he had missed that these were the warnings of someone much wiser and far more powerful than Bilbo had taken him for. You saw Bilbo's face when Gandalf revealed some of that power to him. This was a side to his friend that Bilbo had seen before, as they'd been on previous adventures together, but one that he'd forgotten about and phased out of his mind to be replaced by a kindly old man who made great fireworks.

I reckon sometimes we can be like that with God. We think we're basically in charge of our lives, we can solve our own problems, and God is kind of there but not really involved. Maybe we think of him as a mate, close or distant depending on how we're feeling at the time, a relationship you don't really have to work on because you've got this understanding with him, that he'll help your life work out. After all, he's a God of love, so he'll be good to us and bless us, right?

Well, no. What this passage makes clear is that God is someone who has to be treated very seriously because in the end he is the one who counts. No matter how much we think we're important, no matter how many achievements we think we've made, how good we think we are, frankly, it's rubbish. See, we're not like this, on equal footing. Here's us down here, and here's God up here, not in any way beholden to us. He's like the ultimate tall poppy pruner.

So back to my initial question. Where are *you* in relation to God? Do you see you and God as equal partners, or do you give him his proper place as in charge of everything, to whom you should refer everything? Are you taking God for granted and getting complacent? We really need to get this right, because as soon as we start giving more respect to ourselves than God, that's when this self-sufficiency starts to infect us and drag us off in the direction Judah found itself. So think about it: do you need to get some more humility in your mindset? It takes guts to be humble, but the first step is appreciating God for who he is on his terms. As someone once said: “Humility is knowing there's a God, and that you're not him.”

Let me be clear, I'm not saying that this makes God untouchable: like Bilbo ran to have a hug from Gandalf, and we can always approach God and he'll embrace us too. It just makes this is an even more beautiful privilege when we acknowledge that gap over which he reaches to us in grace and love.

All this is very serious, and sometimes when you read the prophets it can all seem very hopeless. But there is a small element of hope, *if* Judah decides on obedience.

So my second question is much like the first: where are you in God's plan? Are you on board or not?

Back to our passage” 2 In the last days the mountain of the LORD's temple will be established as chief among the mountains; it will be raised above the hills, and all nations will stream to it. 3 Many peoples will come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house 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.”

What the Old Testament people of God were looking forward to when “in that day” came was not sitting on clouds with harps or something, they were looking forward to true peace, shalom, when they would have no more enemies to worry about as they lived in the Promised Land. They would worship God with hearts of true obedience in his temple on Mount Zion. But something isn't right here. It's not Judah who's meditating on God's unfailing love and reaping the benefits of God's judgments, it's the nations, who are usually seen as outsiders, those people that God's people aren't. What's happened? Where is Judah?

It's pretty self-explanatory, as far as Isaiah is concerned. Judah has missed the boat. More importantly, though, Judah has missed the point, the point of their existence as God's people. This is why Isaiah is urging them: “5 Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the LORD.” But will they? Or will God abandon them to their idols?

Have you ever missed out on something just because you were lazy? My husband, Ben, used to be in the air force cadets when he was small, and they used to go on camps at places like RAAF Base Williamtown, where they could see what it was like to be a real air force pilot, watching the F-18s fly about and outrunning guard dogs when they snuck out at night. On one such camp, their instructors came in and said, “Okay, we need 18 volunteers to wash these really grotty trucks that are caked in mud.” Well, if you don't need to do work, why do work, right? So Ben continued on doing whatever he was doing while 18 of his fellow cadets went off to do the unpleasant cleaning job. A fair while later they came back. “You'll never guess what,” they said. “After we finished washing, they took us up in a Blackhawk and flew us around. It was amazing! You totally should have put your hand up.” Of course they continued to talk about it for the rest of the camp, and Ben is still kicking himself today that he never volunteered.

But the opportunity that we're all looking at as Christians is far more exciting than a helicopter flight. This is the kingdom of God we're talking about. We can be on board or not, we can be involved or not, an active part or a useless passenger, but the decision is up to us.

I'm not saying that God will abandon us and not let us into a final rest with him. What I'm saying is there's more to the Christian life than having “Christian” stamped on you. Yes, we've been saved, but we've been saved into responsibility and community. We have a responsibility to express our faith through our actions, and we do this not only by ourselves but especially in community with others believers, here in Waitara, in Australia, and all around the world. God is growing his kingdom, and he graciously lets us be a part of that amazing work he's doing in the world, if we want it. Yes, God can work miracles to have his will done on earth as it is in heaven, but because he has made us receptacles of his Spirit, we can be his agents here on earth, his hands and his feet, to make God stuff happen.

This is our joy and hope of eternal peace busting into our current, boring world to shake it for God,

to challenge it to follow him and not its idols and heroes. And as we rejoice in following God in obedience, we may draw others to worship God too, especially those for whom their faith is just a rubber stamp. That way we can all rejoice together as we wait expectantly for God's day to come, when we can worship God with true hearts in the heavenly Zion.

So back to my initial question: Where are you?

Are you on the same level as God or not? It's the difference between puffing yourself up to try and make yourself feel important, or being humble and recognising that really it's God who's Lord over everything.

Are you on board or not? It's the difference between sitting back complacently on the assumption that you're fine with God, and actually being that community that rejoices together in being part of God's work in the world.

So make your choice, but make sure it's the right one. I think Isaiah makes it pretty clear just what that is.