

Followers of the Way

Perspective, realism, and hope

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Isaiah 57:1-21

The prophet Isaiah brings God's word to the Jewish people over 600 years before the birth of Christ, yet his message is as fresh and relevant today as when it was first preached. He's writing at a time of political turmoil. The Israelite kingdoms of Israel and Judah are suffering from political instability and live under constant threat of foreign invasion. During Isaiah's lifetime, the rising military power of Assyria threatens and eventually overthrows Israel to the north, whilst little Judah in the south is surrounded on every side and clings to independence by its fingernails.

Isaiah doesn't shy away from speaking hard truths about the sinfulness that's brought his nation to this desperate position, but as always, God doesn't leave His people without comfort and hope. The prophet's call is threefold: to see things from God's perspective; to be honest about where we are and not try to deny reality; and to look forward to our coming redemption, and the part we have to play in God's purposes. He's looking to past (what we've done), present (where we are) and future (where God wants to take us). So, we'll consider in turn (1) gaining God's perspective (2) making an honest appraisal and (3) looking to our coming redemption.

God's perspective

Terrible things are happening all around us. Never mind what grabs our attention because we see it playing out in today's news stories. Plenty else is taking place below the radar, in this country and all over the world, with man's inhumanity to man on display wherever we care to look. There's nothing new about this. It's been so ever since Adam and Eve were cast out of Eden and will be so till the end of time. It's part and parcel of living in a fallen world, a problem of the human heart that's bound up with our sinful nature. That's not to be glib about sin and suffering, simply to put them in context.

Isaiah challenges our instinctive way of looking at things and invites us to see them from God's point of view: "The righteous perish, and no-one ponders it in his heart; devout men are taken away, and no-one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil." (Isaiah 57:1). This is a reference to a historical event, the death of Judah's King Josiah. Though Josiah put in place religious reforms to turn the people back to the one true God, he died in battle against the Egyptians (2 Kings 23:29, 2 Chronicles 35:20-27). Many would have asked themselves how this could be. In fact, the prophetess Huldah explained that God in His mercy would take this righteous king to Him to spare him from seeing the disaster of the impending Babylonian invasion which resulted in the people of Judah being taken into captivity (2 Kings 22:19-26).

So, there's a point being made that's specific to the circumstances of Isaiah's day, but also a more general point that applies to all later generations, ours included. If we adopt God's perspective on death, we should look at it differently because we have the assurance that, "Those who walk uprightly enter into peace; they find rest as they lie in death." (Isaiah 57:2).

If we or those we love are suffering, it's hard. When good people die – especially if they die young or as a result of injustice or leaving young children – it's agonising. We rightly grieve, and as the people of God, we should “weep with them that weep” (Romans 12:15, KJV). Jesus says, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4). So, we shouldn't be unfeeling in the face of death and suffering. But neither should we see these things the same way unbelievers do.

These opening verses of Isaiah's sermon are a call to greater maturity. The Bible tell us that the birth pangs of the new creation will become more frequent and more extreme. We're still in the foothills, with much more to come, and need to put on spiritual muscle if we're to be able to do as Paul describes: to “put on the full armour of God, so that when the day of evil comes, [we] may be able to stand [our] ground, and after [we] have done everything, to stand.” (Ephesians 6:13). Speaking about terrible events that will happen in the last days, Jesus says, “when these things begin to take place, stand up and lift up your heads, because your redemption is drawing near.” (Luke 21:28).

If we adopt God's perspective, what the world regards as unmitigated disaster looks different, since we know it's working towards the fulfilment of His plan for the re-making of creation, when there'll be “a new heaven and a new earth” (Revelation 21:1) and God “will wipe every tear from [our] eyes. There will be no more death or mourning or crying or pain, for the old order of things has passed away.” (Revelation 21:4).

An honest appraisal

God's perspective allows us to carry out an honest appraisal of who and what we are, and where we stand before Him – as individuals, as Church and as a nation. We've no need to bury our heads in the sand or seek refuge in comforting lies, the way so many try to. Honesty with ourselves is a necessary first step if we're to be honest before God, admitting what we've done wrong, repenting of it, and seeking His forgiveness.

The charge sheet against the ancient Israelites is a long one, and it applies just as much to us:

- Sorcery, adultery and prostitution (Isaiah 57:3).
- Mockery, sneering, rebellion and lies (Isaiah 57:4).
- Lust and child sacrifice (Isaiah 57:5).
- Idolatry and false worship (Isaiah 57:6-7).
- Adopting pagan symbolism and forsaking the one true God (Isaiah 57:8).
- Making a covenant with death (Isaiah 57:9).
- Relying on their own strength (Isaiah 57:10).

Just as God called Israel to ponder the reality of death (Isaiah 57:1), so after rehearsing a list of their sins, he calls them to ponder “whom you have so dreaded and feared that you have been false to me, and have [not] remembered me ...?” (Isaiah 57:11). The enemies of Christianity try to claim it's anti-rational, but the opposite is true. God doesn't ask us to check our brains at the door when we come to worship him, but to engage with our minds (to ponder) as well as with our souls, spirits and bodies. Look at where we are as a culture at the moment, facing the bankruptcy of everything the great secular humanist experiment of the post-war years promised. Just as in Isaiah's day, we're “wearied by all [our] ways, but [we] would not say, ‘It is hopeless.’” (Isaiah 57:10). Wherever we gaze, the casualties of this experiment lie all around – in broken marriages, addictions, self-harm and so much more besides. Yet those in positions of power refuse to acknowledge the truth. Instead, their answer is to double down on the policies that have failed so badly. Every time there's a bit of respite from the latest disaster, there's no giving of thanks to God. Rather, the reaction is to rejoice in the fact the “[We] found renewal of [our] strength, and so [we] did not faint.” (Isaiah 57:10).

This is what we have to expect from the world. But, as the people of God, our approach should be different. So, we have to ask ourselves, what are we afraid of and is there any realistic basis for that fear? We've had the fear of covid, we're experiencing fear connected with war between Russia and Ukraine. There are going to be a lot more things coming down the track that could spark fear. Now's the time to consider: where does our trust really reside?

In this nation, it must seem to most people as though God's been "long silent" (Isaiah 57:11). Yes, He's continued to speak to His faithful remnant, but this hasn't been communicated to the people at large in a way they've been able to understand and take hold of. So, collectively we've sought refuge in all sorts of falsehoods rather than in God, and the result is that we're in a hole we can't get out of on our own. The choices before us today are the same as they were for Judah and Israel when Isaiah preached: either to "cry out for help ... [to a] collection of idols ... [which] a mere breath will blow ... away" (Isaiah 57:13) or to be among those who "make [God our] refuge [and so] will inherit the land and possess [His] holy mountain." (Isaiah 57:13).

God is in the process of "[exposing] ... [our] works" (Isaiah 57:12) – what we've done as a society and what the consequences of this are. We've seen this in every area of national life in recent years, and that process is still going on. Despite everything, though, it seems we've not yet learned the lesson that "[our] righteousness and [our] works ... will not benefit [us]." (Isaiah 57:12).

This is our situation as a nation and these are the choices God's setting before us. Across the face of this planet, the LORD is doing an amazing work of exposing deeds of unrighteousness and the reality of what's in men's hearts. To whom now will we cry out? He's once again revealing Himself to the nations, in His beauty, holiness and majesty: as "the high and lofty One ... who lives forever, whose name is holy" (Isaiah 57:15). For the whole of my lifetime, we've spurned Him. Will we at last turn and give Him the glory and honour that's due to His name?

That's the honest appraisal of where we are, and it's not pretty. But the astounding thing is, God has a rescue plan. Isaiah means, "the LORD saves" and, after diagnosing our sickness, the prophet tells us about God's cure for the disease of our hearts and minds. About our salvation, in other words.

Coming redemption

God has a rescue plan – for individuals, for nations and for the entire world. He doesn't stay aloof in "a high and holy place" (Isaiah 57:15), but also comes to dwell "with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit" (Isaiah 57:15). His heartfelt desire is "to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite." (Isaiah 57:15).

It's undoubtedly true that we need to repent: as individuals, as Church and as a nation. Repenting – which means not just regretting what we've done wrong and saying sorry for it, but resolving to turn decisively away from it and walk in God's ways – is essential to having that contrite heart and lowly spirit God seeks. It involves humbling ourselves by acknowledging that we've made a mess of things and will never be able to work out solutions on our own. Or, as Isaiah puts it, "{our] righteousness and [our] works ... will not benefit us." (Isaiah 57:12).

But the LORD is an extraordinary God. He told Moses, "I will have mercy on whom I will have mercy and I will have compassion on whom I will have compassion." (Exodus 33:19). Sometimes, He moves in ways that defy our attempts at explanation. Through Isaiah, He says, "I will not accuse forever, nor will I always be angry, for then the spirit of man would grow faint before me – the breath of man that I have created." (Isaiah 57:16). God is merciful and full of lovingkindness (or unfailing love, as some translations render it).

We should never forget that He's also a holy and just God, and these aspects of His character mean He's been "enraged by [our] sinful greed" (Isaiah 57:17). For this reason, He's "punished [us], and hid [His] face in anger" (Isaiah 57:17). And, despite this, we "kept on in [our] sinful ways." (Isaiah 57:17). Any human would have given up on us long ago, but not God. His response defies all our attempts to create neat categories and systems. We might look at the state of our nation and feel like giving up in despair, thinking we're so far down the wrong track we're beyond all hope of redemption. If that's how you feel, take a look at what God has to say about it: "I have seen [man's] ways, but I will heal him; I will guide him and restore comfort to him, creating praise on the lips of the mourners in Israel. Peace, peace. To those far and near." Says the LORD. "And I will heal them." (Isaiah 57:18-19).

God purposes to come once more in power to this nation. When He does, there will sadly be some who choose not to listen and not to turn. Isaiah tells us about such people: "the wicked [who] are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 'There is no peace,' says my God, 'for the wicked.'" (Isaiah 57:20-21). But there'll be many, many more who'll find what Isaiah describes in earlier verses: a reviving of spirit and heart (Isaiah 57:15), comfort, restoration and healing (Isaiah 57:18), and a heart of praise instead of mourning (Isaiah 57:19).

Application

Yes, God has a rescue plan. But what we sometimes fail to grasp is, we're part of that plan. We have a job to do to prepare for the coming of our King: to, "Build up, build up, prepare the road! Remove the obstacles out of the way of my people." (Isaiah 57:14). How do we do this?

We do it as individuals by:

Striving to see things from God's perspective, rather than our own. We need God's revelation rather than human information and opinion. We get this revelation through prayerful reading of Scripture and through the inspiration of the Holy Spirit, remembering that *everything* must be tested against the plumbline of God's Word (the Bible) – more important than ever in such days of great deception.

We do it as Church by:

Standing in the gap for our nation in prayer: to pray in the purposes of God, to wage prayer warfare where we have power and authority to do so and to repent for the failings of the Church. There are many wonderful people and ministries who've been salt and light in their communities, but overall, we have to say that the Church hasn't done a good job of shepherding the nation in recent years. We need to be honest about this to ourselves and with God. The state of the nation reflects the state of the Church.

And what of the nation?

We can't expect an unbelieving people to repent. By and large, they don't know what repentance is or why it's needed. Why should they? They've never been told or properly instructed from the Word of God. So, our job is to show them the goodness of the LORD – sometimes by telling them about it, more often for being a channel for the manifestation of it – because the Bible says that it's "God's kindness [or goodness that] leads [us] towards repentance." (Romans 2:4).

Sometimes, in our keenness to see people saved, we can be tempted to try and do the Holy Spirit's job for Him and convict people of sin. That's not our task. It's the Holy Spirit who "will convict the world of guilt in regard to sin and righteousness and judgment" (John 16:8). We have to trust that God has this in hand and He'll do His bit if only we'll do ours.

Paul said, “Even though I was once a blasphemer and a persecutor and a violent man, I was shown mercy because I acted in ignorance and unbelief.” (1 Timothy 1:13). Some act with evil intent, but most act out of ignorance and unbelief. Do we expect that God is any less willing to show them mercy than He was to Paul? Why should we think that when “Jesus Christ is the same yesterday and today and forever” (Hebrews 13:8)? Our job is not to worry over the things we can’t do anything about or to try and do things God never meant for us to do. Our job is to keep our eyes on Jesus and faithfully perform the tasks He’s given to us. Let’s rededicate ourselves to that work today. Amen.