

# **St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore**

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**ISAIAH**

**30<sup>th</sup> October 2016**

Isaiah 30:8-18  
Matthew 24:1-14

If you came to church this morning seeking some comfort and reassurance – and many of us do seek that – our Scripture readings may have made you quake in your boots, or despair, or tune out. Isaiah is in one of his prophet-of-warning modes, telling people that they are faithless and rebellious and warning of disaster to come, as complete as when a potter's vessel is smashed so thoroughly that not even a useable shard can be found among the fragments. And then Jesus, who we look to for a bit of hope, goes and talks about further disaster coming, this time, not because of faithlessness but for the very opposite reason, because his people are faithful to him. It's not exactly comforting hearing on either count.

However, don't quake in your boots, and don't despair and please do not tune out. Because there is a word for us, as there always is when we look into Scripture, and it is not a word of despair – you might even find it a word of comfort.

I wonder what you think of the Old Testament? It tends to be a bit like Marmite – people either love it or hate it. As we have embarked on our Bible Study of the prophets, we have had both reactions in the discussion groups. In particular, as we have read page after page of warning and vengeance many of us have struggled. Is this the God of love which we meet in the words of Jesus and the later epistles of the Apostles? Is this how he speaks to us, or does Jesus change all that? Some of us have confessed to not reading every word thoroughly and consideredly, as it was too difficult, and one person at least has openly admitted to sometimes, when it was too upsetting, just turning a page. I am so glad that we can be honest with each other!

One of the things I have been thinking as I too have struggled to read pages and pages of judgement, is that the people concerned could not just turn a page. They could not just switch off God's voice. Even if they refused to listen to the prophets – and many did just that – they had to live with the disasters which did indeed come upon them. We can comfort ourselves as we read with the knowledge that as the history of the people moved on, as the disasters came to them, so the tone of the prophets changed subtly, to bring more in terms of hope and promise of restoration. It is still hard to read the warnings, but we know how the story turns out.

But when the disasters foretold did in fact come on the people, when first Israel were taken captive by the Assyrians, and then Judah was over-run by the Babylonians, (who had taken over the Assyrian empire,) and when they were taken into exile, the people had to live through it. They could not close the book, skip a bit, turn a page. There are some very gory predictions of the prophets about what will be done to the people, to

babies, to children, to women and to men, and while the historical parts of the Biblical texts are not gratuitously lurid, and do not give us such details, we can only assume that the prophets were speaking of what was common practice for conquering people to do to those who were overcome. In fact, it reads very much like what we shudder to hear that the so-called Islamic State does to people in places where it takes control. Some things do not change.

The people had to go through with it, day after day, just as many in the Middle East are going through impossibly difficult times day after day right now. They too cannot turn a page.

The hard times of which Jesus warns are primarily things that happen. He was talking to his disciples who were, of course, still looking for that elusive thing, the “Day of the Lord”, and in common with many of their contemporaries, tended to look for evidence of it in the events of the world. But Jesus says that wars happen, famines happen, earthquakes just happen. It is the way things are in this fallen world. This does not mean that we should not care about them, and care about the human fall-out when they do happen, but happen they will and we should not read too much into them in terms of God’s judgement. They happen and people have to cope and carry on, people of faith as well.

To go back to Isaiah, the prophets were not the only ones who could see the threat from afar. The powers that be could see it too, and this is why they wanted the prophets to give them a better message, to speak “smooth things” to them – they could see trouble clearly enough. They could see it, and their solution was to be very, very busy. They said that they would flee upon horses, galloping off here and there, seeking support and allies from the nations around. But God said to them that

*“In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength.”(v:15)*

It went against the grain then, and it goes against the grain now. If there is disaster looming, we want to do something. Perhaps there are practical things which can be done, but running around in a panic only increases our fear, which is why Isaiah says that a thousand will flee at the threat of one. All that galloping around on horses will only fuel fear and rumour, just as multiple posts about something on social media can fuel it in our day and age. What is far more helpful is to spend time in returning, which is repentance, turning to God and resting in him, in learning to be quiet and trusting him. This really is helpful, not necessarily in averting the disaster, but in giving the inner spiritual strength needed to stand up to whatever may come.

People who are really going through things know the truth of this statement. This is why you will find that where there is disaster, as well as crying out for food, for shelter, for medicines, people cry out for Bibles, for gospels, for scriptures which will help them to find God in their situation. When life brings disasters upon you, of whatever kind, Scripture ceases to become a luxury and becomes a necessity: because knowing God’s presence is not just a pleasant thing, something that would be nice, but a matter of life and death.

Disasters do come, and they come to the faithful as much as to the faithless. In Isaiah’s day, the faithlessness of the nation as a whole might have been condemned, but there were faithful people within it, and they were as much affected as anyone else when the

invading forces arrived. In Jesus' looking ahead, he sees that in hard times, when people want a scapegoat to blame, it would at least sometimes be his followers who would bear that burden. Disasters come, and people have to go through them. We cannot stop concentrating or leaf on forward to the next bit of our stories or of the stories that are unfolding all around us.

But we can turn to God. We can turn to God with our own pain and questions. We can turn to God with our pain on behalf of others. And we can rest and build on the promise that Isaiah gives his people that

*"Therefore the Lord waits to be gracious to you; therefore he will rise up to show mercy to you." (v:18)*

Jesus predicts that in difficult times many will fall away from the faith, or betray each other and hate each other, as lack of faith, as questioning of God's love and presence and mercy breeds an "everyone for themselves" kind of attitude. He says that the love of many will grow cold, which is such a sad thing. But he also says that "the one who endures to the end will be saved."

In this life we will all have some troubles to endure, and when we find that they come we would do well to remember that our strength comes not from running around in a panic, nor in turning from God in bitterness of spirit, but in turning to God and resting our trust in him, allowing our faith to steady us and to grow. If you came here today seeking comfort, then let this be your comfort. Take the quietness of being here with you when you leave, the quietness of sitting in one place, which stops you running around doing things which may or may not be helpful. Allow that quietness to go with you, and turn to it often when your need of comfort is greatest, making peace and space in your life for God. The habit of trust will make you strong.

And when we see the trials that come on other people: when we see the turmoil and suffering from war in the Middle East; when we see the devastation wrought in Nepal by an earthquake which barely registers in our memories now; when we see the suffering of the people of Haiti because of a hurricane; when we see the people of Malawi facing yet another famine, then we should not grow bored and turn the page. We should pray, pray with our whole hearts, pray in a way that means that we take their situation deep into the most personal part of our lives. Pray in a way that drives us to Godly action.

Sometimes the suffering of others is too hard for us to witness, and upsets us and we don't want it to, so with compassion fatigue we turn away to our own less hazardous lives. But that is not what we should do. We *should* allow the plight of our fellow-humans to disturb us, we *should* allow ourselves to have our equilibrium upset sometimes: how else will we find the motivation and energy to help? So if you are reading the prophets in our study, and if you are finding it hard going at times, and would like to turn away, then think of the people who are living in the distress that the prophets spoke of, and vow to stand with them in every way that you can, in prayer, in giving, in campaigning – maybe in going. For thus it is that, as Jesus says the gospel, the good news of God's love, will be proclaimed to every nation, not only in word but also in deed. Amen.