**St. Paul’s Banbury Sermon Text, 16th August 2020**

**Isaiah 55: 1 - 13**

**Intro**

What is God like?

How would you answer that?

He’s big, he’s everywhere, say some… Yes, but not only big and everywhere... He’s all knowing say others… yes, but not only all knowing… He is love, Christians would say… yes, but what does that actually mean…? and how might somebody who doesn’t yet know him understand that? He’s fierce say others; you only have to look at the Old Testament for evidence of his wrath and judgment… yes, God is justifiably angry about sin, but if we stop there, what else about God are we missing….?

What about his holiness, which makes him far away and distant an unapproachable…? Well yes, God is holy… look for example at Isaiah’s vision of the holiness of God 6: 1 - 4:

1 In the year that King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord, high and exalted, seated on a throne; and the train of his robe filled the temple. 2 Above him were seraphim *[like angels]*, each with six wings: With two wings they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they were flying. 3 And they were calling to one another:

“Holy, holy, holy is the Lord Almighty; the whole earth is full of his glory.”

4 At the sound of their voices the doorposts and thresholds shook and the temple was filled with smoke.

Wonderfully, Isaiah doesn’t stop there! He recognised his unworthiness because this holy God, and a little later we read,

7 …he touched my mouth and said, “See, this has touched your lips; your guilt is taken away and your sin atoned for.”

Yes, God is big… and everywhere… and all knowing… and justifiably angry because of sin… and utterly holy… and yet his heart’s desire is to take away our guilt and atone for our sin - that means to put things right between us and him.

Todays’ passage - Isaiah 55 - show us more of God’s heart towards us… it gives us an insight into what he is really like.

This morning, we will be taking a broad overview of the passage, with the intention - I hope! - of getting you excited enough to spend more time thinking it though this week… Meditate on it on it, talk to others about it… chew it over and pray that God would help you see his heart for you more clearly…

**1. A simple invitation (v. 1 - 5)**

v. 1 - 5 are a beautiful invitation to the thirsty and hungry… it is written to all those in need… those who need to experience the everlasting love with which God will have compassion (54:7).

How are we to experience God’s compassion? It’s not complicated!

Firstly, *come*… repeated five times

The invitation is to come to the one who is able to satisfy (v. 2) … The Lord - Yahweh - is the one who satisfies with the finest drink and the finest food, all without charge. And of course, 300 or so years later, Jesus - the Lord incarnate - said in John 7: 37, “let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink.” We come to the Lord by coming to Jesus. When we want to see what God is like, we look at Jesus.

Secondly, *listen*… repeated three times

v. 3 We need to listen, because God is speaking to us of an everlasting covenant, fulfilling what was promised to David. The sign of that covenant will be the universe permanently and perfectly restored - v. 13 - everything made new. All the bad turned into good, for all eternity.

So, we had a simple invitation, now notice…

**2. A simple response (v. 6 - 7a)**

*Seek* the Lord… while he may be found … call upon him… while he is near.

Whether you are one of God’s chosen people, thus attracting others to him (5), or one of the wicked, unrighteous people who don’t believe in God… whoever you are, you should turn from your sin and seek him…

Notice that this isn’t an open-ended instruction… we need to seek him *now*. A time will come when it is too late and there will be no more time to find peace for those rejecting God (57: 20 - 21).

20 But the wicked are like the tossing sea, which cannot rest, whose waves cast up mire and mud. 21 “There is no peace,” says my God, “for the wicked.”

So, we mustn’t ignore the reality that there is judgment awaiting those who harden their hearts and refuse to come… listen… and receive… from the Lord… The well-known phrase people often use glibly today when their rest is interrupted by being called to do something - “There is no peace for the wicked” - comes from Isaiah, and it speaks of an eternal judgment separating them from God.

That is tragic, but it is avoidable: the wicked and unrighteous *can* come… listen… and receive God’s mercy and experience God’s abundant pardon. Yes, it’s right that God is angry at sin - remember we saw how holy he is in Isaiah 6 - God and sin cannot coexist. We should be in no doubt that God *must* and *will* punish sin…

BUT THAT ISN’T HIS HEART’S DESIRE!

His heart’s desire is to have compassion… to show mercy… to abundantly pardon… to bring peace.

So, what of those who *do* accept the invitation and seek the Lord?

v. 7b. gives us a tantalising glimpse deep into God’s heart:

**3. A glimpse into God’s heart (7b - 13)**

7 … let him return to the Lord that he may have *compassion* on him, and to our God, for he will *abundantly pardon*. (ESV)

I asked earlier how you would answer the question, “What is God like?” It’s harder to answer than you think, because we instinctively try to answer it from our own sinful human perspective… Yes, I know God has forgiven me and shown me mercy, despite the fact that I deserve his judgment and punishment… it’s so generous of him to put aside his anger and forgive me again and again… so I’d better pray harder… study more… try harder not to sin again…

Of course, those are good things to do! But the risk is, our desire to do something for God can change the way we view who he is. Instead of our thoughts focusing on God, we focus them on ourselves… I can manage… I’ll pray if I get stuck, but I reckon I can do it myself… I’m too sinful for God… what I’ve done is too shameful… God wouldn’t - couldn’t possibly - accept me…

Friends, that’s human thinking and it’s sinful, wrong thinking!

In Christianity Explored, we watch a video that starts with Christmas morning and a child opening an amazing present from mum and dad. The parents smile as they watch excitedly, then the child looks up and frowns, and says, “Okay, how much do I owe you?” She hasn’t understood her parents all!

We can be like that with God. And yet, he is compassionate… merciful… and wants to abundantly pardon… not just a half-hearted, begrudging, “Oh, it’s Steve doing *that* again… oh well, I suppose I’d better do something about it… again…”

No! The Lord has made a covenant with us! He LONGS to pardon again… and again… and again.

Dane Ortland puts it like this, in his highly recommended book, “Gentle and Lowly”:

Returning to God in fresh contrition, however ashamed and disgusted with ourselves, he will not *tepidly* pardon. He will *abundantly* pardon. He does not merely *accept* us. He *sweeps us up in his arms* again.” [emphasis added]

God knows how hard we find it to understand this abundance of his. Our minds are tiny, minuscule, vanishingly small… and nothing we can ever do could make us acceptable to God… that’s what v. 8 - 9 are about; we need to look at God with different glasses on. God is not like us - his thoughts of love and compassion and his desire to forgive are beyond our human comprehension…

That’s why it’s such good news that it isn’t down to us to work it all out!

We simply need to come to him… and receive his compassion and abundant pardon.

And when we do that, what happens? God continuously sustains us and keeps us. Look at v. 10 - 13…

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.

In other words, just as the rain falls to make things grow and provide water for us to drink, before it evaporates and returns to the sky to fall again as more rain, so when God speaks, his word (the same word that spoke the universe into being) does its work of bringing about God’s purposes and plans; it continues doing its work as God continues to speak through his word. Nothing can divert it, it never runs out, there is never a drought of God’s word. That’s why Isaiah could say in 40: 8, “The grass withers, the flower fades, but the word of our God will stand forever.”

So, what are those plans that cannot be diverted? Look at v. 12 - 13:

God’s heartbeat is that his people should know real joy and peace - a joy so profound that the whole of creation will dance to its tune! It is joy and peace that can only come from being reconciled to God, being brought back into the relationship he longs for! This is the glorious future he is restoring us for.

He *delights* to come to us, to fill us with joy, to pour out his compassion onto us, to abundantly pardon us. That is his heart!

For the one who comes and listens and receives what God offers from his very heart, there is a simple invitation, with a simple response that gives us a glimpse into God’s heart.

Whatever you’ve done… whatever struggles you are facing… if you feel alone… or are grieving… or if you feel you simply can’t approach such a holy God… or you think that none of this could possibly apply to you… listen to what Isaiah says in 57: 15 - 19:

15 For this is what the high and exalted One says—he who lives forever, whose name is holy:

“I live in a high and holy place, but also with the one who is contrite and lowly in spirit, to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite.

16 I will not accuse them forever, nor will I always be angry, for then they would faint away because of me—the very people I have created.

17 I was enraged by their sinful greed; I punished them, and hid my face in anger, yet they kept on in their wilful ways.

18 I have seen their ways, but I will heal them; I will guide them and restore comfort to Israel’s mourners,

19 creating praise on their lips. Peace, peace, to those far and near,” says the Lord. “And I will heal them.”

Amen.