

Sermon 13 January 2019

Isaiah 43:1-7 and Luke 3:15-17 and 21-22

A little while ago in the PCC we were asked which was our favourite children's song when we were small. Quite a few of us piped up 'wide, wide as the ocean'. It's one of mine. For two reasons, the first is that it gives permission to bash the sibling standing on either side of you, whilst they of course are doing it back to you. 'Wide, wide as the ocean, high as the heavens above, deep, deep as the deepest sea is my saviours love. I, though so unworthy, still am a child of his care, for his word teaches me that his love reaches me everywhere'. And that's the second reason – that his love reaches me wherever I am.

Do you know the book – Guess how much I love you - a story told to children since 1994, where the big nutbrown hare competes with the little nutbrown hare to measure their love for one another and one says– I love you to the moon and back. Isaiah speaks of a God who loves us more than that, a God who knows each of us by name, who tells us not to be afraid.

And these wonderful words from Isaiah, are words of love. They are familiar words, and as I was reading them in preparation, I remembered that I had heard a wonderful sermon on them by Sam Wells, the vicar of St Martins in the Field, at the Church Times Festival of Preaching about 18 months ago – I lead an exciting life. He also used the sermon in a teaching session at the Bristol Diocesan conference in 2017, which you can see on You Tube – google Sam Wells and Bristol and it pops up. I am going to borrow some, not all, of his words – I thought I'd admit to the plagiarism.

Isaiah was writing in the time of exile when the people of God were far from Jerusalem, where they were slaves in Babylon. A place of sorrow, a place of lament. They had experienced carnage, displacement, loss of their land, their temple, neighbours, family, friends, identity. And yet Isaiah's words are words of hope, words of love, words that say, I know you, you are mine.

While we are unlikely to have experienced the loss that the people of Israel experienced, we do know the loss of hope, of ideas, of health, of opportunities. We live in dark times, times when it seems as if the country is in a time of deep depression and hope is dissolving.

You might find it helpful to look at the reading from Isaiah.

Verse 1: God has created you, that is a miracle, you are unique, God made you, wanted you and has a role for you.

God has set you free, do not be afraid. God knows you, he knows you are not perfect, but where damage is done, God can put it right. God understands you, he forgives you, has redeemed you. You don't need to have secrets from him. He has called you by name, he regards you as if you were the only one. You may have felt that you don't fit in, but you now belong to God.

Verse 2: God will be with you when you go through flood and fire. God doesn't say that bad things won't happen, but that he will be with you when they do. Patrick Lumumba, the Diocesan Secretary in the Diocese of Northern Uganda experienced this at first hand this

week. A fire was started by thieves on the veranda of his house in the early hours of the morning which spread to the room his children were sleeping in. His neighbour raised the alarm. The children are safe. Patrick writes: 'We thank God that even when some property has been destroyed, God has protected our lives. But we are still trying to heal from this problem.'

Verse 3: God will make sacrifices for you. Jesus will give up everything for you.

Verse 4: And why? Because you are precious, honoured and loved. All three are more meaningful together than they are separately. Precious, honoured and loved.

And when we read this together with Luke's account of Jesus' baptism, we hear God saying of Jesus: 'You are my Son, the beloved, with you I am well pleased'. Precious, honoured and loved.

Baptism is a promise of love and grace. It is something we can remember and renew each day. We have the gift of abundant water. As we wash our faces and hands we can recall the water of baptism, which itself recalls the water of creation, the parting of the Red Sea, the crossing of the Jordan. We can remember being marked with the sign of the cross, marking ourselves on our foreheads. Recalling that we are all God's beloved children. This is a relationship that was established by God. We can neglect it, deny it, run away from it, ignore it but we can't destroy it.

Baptism is a promise of love and grace. It is also a promise of risk.

Matthew, Mark and Luke all relate how after Jesus' baptism, he was led by the Holy Spirit into the wilderness where he was tempted. Baptism doesn't mean we are safe from the fires and floods of life. Jesus' baptism is a sign to us that he identifies with us. He was equipped and empowered by the Holy Spirit and so are we.

Isaiah's first audience was a group of people in exile far from home, lamenting their loss. Yet he called them precious, honoured and loved.

We can claim his words of hope for ourselves.

Jesus was given by God in exchange for us.

May God give strength to his people, may God bless his people.

May you know that you are precious, honoured and loved.

Amen

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