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10p

Isaiah chapter 8:11 – 9:7

The Darkness and the Light

“The Darkness and the Light” is the essential link from Isaiah chapter 8 to Isaiah chapter 9. And it is a topical theme for this time of year, isn't it? I have to say I like the English seasons. I love it when the days draw in and the winter storms come and you get the first frosts and the dark evenings and fog on the M25, and coal fires in the sitting room. ‘Season of mists and mellow fruitfulness’. I love the constant change of season we enjoy in this clime. But I know that for many the lack of sunlight and the increasing darkness of this time of year, as we creep towards the shortest day, bring on a testing time of depression. So many good friends struggle with a crisis of self-worth around now partly attributable to the lack of daylight.

You see—we human beings are essentially creatures of the light, aren't we? Light is a powerful symbol for us, of life as it ought to be. So 8:22 is a frightening picture for us—*Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness* (8:22). Let's begin by seeing how they reach that state:

1) The Darkness

(8:11-22)

Now, Isaiah wrote 2,700 years ago in a different culture, in a setting we cannot reconstruct with certainty, in Hebrew, and often in poetry (and let's face it: it's hard enough to understand poetry written in English today—let alone poetry in Hebrew from two and a half thousand years ago!) But he wrote about Jesus, and the rich poetic metaphors he used tell us things about Jesus we would not otherwise know.

Please look at 8:11—at this point the prophet Isaiah found himself increasingly isolated from his own society, under a powerful divine constraint: *The LORD spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said: “Do not call conspiracy everything that these people call conspiracy; do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary; but for both houses of Israel he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall. And for the people of Jerusalem he will be a trap and a snare. Many of them will stumble; they will fall and be broken, they will be snared and captured”* (8:11-15).

Do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it (v 12). These people are in darkness because they are frightened of all sorts of things, other than the one thing they should be frightened of: *The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread* (v 13). When people stop fearing God, they lay themselves open to a million other fears. I don't mean the slightly irrational phobias that some people have. Nor is it just the media scaremongering which we are so used to. (How many newspaper column inches and TV news bulletins are they going to dedicate to Bird ‘Flu’, before they pick up their next terror-topic?) No. It is how nervous each one of us is about so many things—failure, ill-health, redundancy, being mugged, getting burgled, having an accident, not having enough money, relationships with the opposite sex, our children's safety, death. We sing:

“Fear Him, you saints, and you will then
Have nothing else to fear”

But our lives don't actually reflect that, do they? When we consider all those petty anxieties which crowd our days, because we do not fear God enough: ***do not fear what they fear, and do not dread it. The LORD Almighty is the one you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread, and he will be a sanctuary*** (vv 12c-14a). Do you see the paradox? If we do fear God, then we have nothing to fear at all—because ***he will be a sanctuary*** (v 14)! But if we do not fear God, then we will be prey to a million fears—and meeting Him will be the worst of them all ***he will be a stone that causes men to stumble and a rock that makes them fall*** (v 14b) (even for people who thought they were religious).

So, these people were in darkness because of the attitude they took to God; they did not fear him (8:11-15), and because of the attitude they took to His word; they did not trust it: ***Bind up the testimony and seal up the law among my disciples. I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him. Here am I, and the children the LORD has given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel from the LORD Almighty, who dwells on Mount Zion*** (8:16-18). The prophet Isaiah and his close followers (*my disciples* v16) and his *children* (v 18) (to whom he had given strange symbolic names, you may remember); that small group had become closely identified with the messages God had given through Isaiah. But the people had turned in other directions to find their guidance and inspiration: ***When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people enquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? To the law and to the testimony! If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn*** (vv 19-20). People will believe in anything rather than the Word of god: Horoscopes, tarot cards, séances, Fen Shui, crystals, any latest New Age Media pundit.

But there is a God and He does speak. And if we try to silence Him by distancing ourselves from His word to us in the Bible, then we are trying to remove Him, indeed to kill Him off, as far as we are concerned. So our attitude to God's word is our attitude to God. And there is no light anywhere else: ***If they do not speak according to this word, they have no light of dawn. Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land; when they are famished, they will become enraged and, looking upward, will curse their king and their God. Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness*** (vv 20b-22). ***Distressed*** (v 21)—we call it 'stressed' nowadays, and the dissatisfaction portrayed in that verse soon turns to anger; and, if we suppress that anger, it may well bubble up again in depression—***Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom, and they will be thrust into utter darkness*** (v 22).

Imagine there was no shortest day to come this winter—we were never to reach the winter solstice; a bit like Narnia: always winter and never Christmas. Suppose the days were to go on getting shorter and shorter, until there was no daylight at all...and we found ourselves in utter darkness. That is how the human race is, according to Isaiah, without God: in deep darkness—ignorant of where we come from, ignorant of where we are going to. From time to time we manage to illuminate the darkness by striking a match (as it were), because something happens that brings meaning to life—we fall in love, we get a job, we have a child, we buy a house, we get a promotion—but it doesn't last. For a moment we see our way, and then the match goes out, and we are left groping for meaning and purpose again. That is how it is always going to be, while God is absent. But into our darkness God has acted.

2) The Light

(9:1-7)

Notice that the light comes into the darkest place and at the darkest time: ***Nevertheless, there will be no more gloom for those who were in distress. In the past he humbled the land of Zebulun and the land of Naphtali, but in the future he will honour Galilee of the Gentiles, by the way of the sea, along the Jordan*** (9:1). Those were the northern regions that first got invaded by nasty neighbours like Syria, Assyria, Babylon, Greece, Rome—and they were where Jesus first started His preaching ministry: ***The people walking in darkness have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death a light has dawned*** (9:2).

How dark does your life seem at the moment? There is no gloom God cannot pierce. How dark does our world seem at the moment? In a country where 'Jerry Springer—The Opera' tours the theatres, and the Government brings legislation that ignores or contradicts God's word, and possibly makes some Christian proclamation illegal, it can seem pretty dark, can't it? But it is never too dark for God's light. In fact, the deeper the darkness, the brighter the light shines.

Notice how God's work is pictured as a contrast to scarcity in verse 3, bondage in verse 4 and warfare in verse 5: ***You have enlarged the nation and increased their joy; they rejoice before you as people rejoice at the harvest, as men rejoice when dividing the plunder. For as in the day of Midian's defeat, you have shattered the yoke that***

burdens them, the bar across their shoulders, the rod of their oppressor. Every warrior's boot used in battle and every garment rolled in blood will be destined for burning, will be fuel for the fire (vv 3-5). God's action is a contrast to normal human experience. His light pierces the darkness. It does not enhance it, or merely ameliorate it to make it a bit easier to live with. It contradicts and obliterates it.

I remember the sense I had just before I became a Christian that I was in a dark tunnel, a cave, in total blackness. But, as people talked to me about Jesus, I thought I detected a gleam of light. It was like when you say to yourself, "Was that light? Or wasn't it?" I knew at that moment I could turn my back and walk away into the darkness, but for the rest of my life I would have known that I had once glimpsed a gleam of light and I had turned away from it. But in His mercy God shone the full light of Christ into my heart that day. And I discovered that light of life by relationship with a Person: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace* (v 6).

What a person! I believe I am right in saying that in the last 2 years Dan Brown has made £104 million out of his novel, *The Da Vinci Code*. I don't think that is entirely because of the brilliance of the story, nor because of the intellectual rigour with which Dan Brown writes. I think it is because of the ongoing fascination of the human race with this Person. (And how many people, like Mr Brown, down the centuries have tried to hijack Him, to create a Jesus of their own imagining!)

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace (v 6). Such a combination of the divine and the human that He meets all our needs and aspirations. Look at the second half of that verse—a *Wonderful Counsellor*: to give me the wisdom I so need in my foolishness; a *Mighty God*: to hold on to me despite my own weakness; an *Everlasting Father*: to provide me with a relationship outside time, when time takes every other relationship away from me (sooner or later); the *Prince of Peace*: to calm the tumult of my anxious mind and my troubled spirit, by reuniting me with my God.

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this (v 7). *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end* (v 7a). What a promise that is! But it must start in me. If I want His rule to stretch out over this planet again, establishing justice and righteousness between nations in our global village, then the first step I can take in that direction is to make sure that the government of my own life is upon His shoulder. He has to be the entire cabinet for me: Prime Minister, Foreign secretary, Home secretary, Chancellor of the Exchequer, Minister of sport—which portfolio are you keeping from Him, I wonder? But as we struggle to surrender every part of our lives to Him, notice how the verse ends: *The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this* (v 7c). His jealous love for us will complete the work He has begun in us, if we are believers, if the process has started in our lives. We do not do it by our own efforts. No: *The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this* (v 7c).

This passage is all about God's initiative. Jesus Christ is God's gift to us: *For to us a child is born, to us a son is given* (v 6a). We did not deserve Him. We did not even welcome Him. We crucified Him. But He brought us the salvation we did not deserve and cannot earn. And His rule will one day be reasserted over all creation.

So let's finish this morning by linking that last clause: *The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this* (v 7c) with Isaiah's response in 8:17: *I will wait for the LORD, who is hiding his face from the house of Jacob. I will put my trust in him*. Faith waits and trusts, even when we cannot see God clearly. However dark the darkness (God *hiding His face*), we look on to the dawn, knowing God will work His purpose out—for you—and for me—and for the whole of creation: *Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David's throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this* (v 7).

(All scripture quoted is from the New International Version of the Bible unless otherwise stated.)