

HANDEL'S MESSIAH 1. THE PROMISE

This service was prepared by the Worship Team and was structured around the musical oratorio The Messiah by Handel. The three sections below reflect something of the overall thrust of the work.

Handel begins his journey through the Bible in music with a promise. These words taken from Isaiah 40 look forward to the glory of God being revealed in the world. He then takes us through some familiar (and not so familiar) Old and New Testament words till that promise is complete. He starts by looking forward to the promise that God has made that He will send the Messiah to the world, that He will send one who will be both Saviour and King. We will tell something of that story. It also has a kind of past, present, and future feel to it, though I'm not quite sure where we draw line between present and future! You'll see what I mean later.

Picture the desert; it is generally not a nice place to be! Sometimes it is full of sand, other times it is all rocks and rough places. The people are given a task: to build a road through the desert, a highway. They think that it can't be done; there are too many obstacles in the way. For a start, the ground goes up and down too much: there are too many hills on the one hand; too many valleys on the other; if it were flat that would be a different matter. There are rough places, rugged rocks, jagged places; these are all kinds of obstacles to travel through the desert.

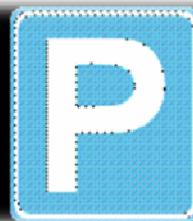
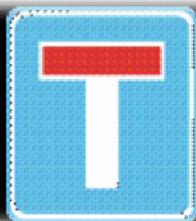
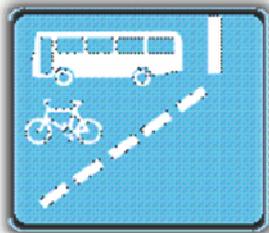
The challenge set by the first of three voices in Isaiah 40; we're not told who these voices are at this stage. But the voice has a job: "*In the desert...*" (Is 40:3) "Your task, my people, is to build that road, to prepare that highway; because God is coming; He is One who will travel along that highway!" What are the obstacles?

- The people's sin could get in way and Lord be so angry with His people that He change His plans; so we need to get rid of that obstacle; people need to repent, turning away from sin and living a good and holy life.
- The people's lack of faith could be an obstacle, not taking the promise seriously and forgetting all about it and neglecting God; so we need to get rid of that obstacle; we must watch with faith, keep faith and hope alive and top that end God sent the prophets.

There may have been other obstacles and yet, God and His people working together are seen to overcome these obstacles and "*Every valley...*" (40:4f) "The Lord's way is to be straight, level and free of obstacle; ie, he will arrive without fail, travel without difficulty and be undelayed by hindrances." (Motyer) That is the hope of the people who read these words and took them to heart; the Lord will come and will not be delayed, will not be hindered, no obstacles will get in his way. Will that happen? Wait and see!

JOHN THE BAPTIST – THE SIGNPOST (Martin Elliot)

Can anyone tell me what these signs mean? (*Show road signs on Powerpoint?*)



Why do we have road signs? They tell us what is coming up and direct us towards where we are going. In the first part of Handel's Messiah, which includes our earlier reading from Isaiah, we saw God promising his people a Messiah, but the people did not know when or how he would appear. They would have to wait 700 years to find out. The second part of Messiah starts with the following reading (*read John 1:29-34*).

What we read in this passage had been predicted by Isaiah in the first reading:

A voice of one calling:

*"In the wilderness prepare
the way for the LORD;
make straight in the desert
a highway for our God."*

This was fulfilled in John the Baptist. By this time John is a well known preacher and was attracting large crowds in the desert. In the passage before this reading, the religious leaders had started asking John who he was – was he Elijah, was he the Prophet foretold by Moses? His preaching was so powerful that people were even beginning to ask whether he himself was the Messiah that they had been waiting for. All of these were suggestions which John had emphatically denied.

When we read this passage we find out very little about John himself and much more about the identity of Jesus. John did not flatter himself or build his own name. He did not attempt to make himself great. John knew that he was merely a voice, something temporary, something which fades but preparing the way for someone much more important who was to come. John knew that his role was to belike a signpost towards Jesus. Not demanding attention of himself but telling the people of what is to come and directing his congregation towards Jesus. In this way he points them towards:

- the one who is the "Lamb of God, who takes away the sin of the world". It was Jewish custom that a lamb was sacrificed in the temple every morning and evening for the sins of the people. However, as these were offerings from people to other people they had no power over sin. Isaiah had already prophesied in Isaiah 53, another chapter well used in this second part of Messiah, that the Messiah would be "led like a lamb to the slaughter". Here was an offering not from any person but from God himself, that would have the power to defeat sin! And not just for Israel alone, but for the whole world, Jews and non-Jews!
- the one who "baptizes with the Holy Spirit". John had been baptizing the people with water when Jesus had come to him to be baptized. Once Jesus had been baptized John had seen the holy spirit come down on him, revealing Jesus' anointing as the Messiah. In contrast to John, Jesus would baptise with the holy spirit, sending it upon all believers, empowering them to live and teach his word.
- and is the "Son of God". What began with the Jewish leaders trying to find out more about who John the Baptist was ends with him testifying about who Jesus is, revealing him to be the son of God.

John knew that his role was to be a voice, but what a voice, what a testimony! He faithfully points the people towards Jesus –recognising that it wasn't about him but understanding his role, to point people towards the Messiah.

Today, people are still looking for a saviour, someone to give them security in an insecure world, but they often need direction to help find it. Our job as Christians is to point them towards Jesus and to show them that he is the one whom they seek. This can be through the things we say or do, the ways in which we live our life or through prayer. May the Lord richly bless you as you seek to be faithful signposts for him!

WORTHY IS THE LAMB

28 times in the book of Revelation John tells us about the Lamb! Jesus is right at the centre! John the Baptist introduced us to the lamb who will take away sins; Revelation shows us the lamb bearing the marks of sacrifice, but now a strong, powerful, mighty lamb; an all-seeing, all-knowing lamb; this is not a defeated sacrificial lamb, but a victorious, conquering lamb. This lamb is seated on the throne of God; this lamb has a scroll in his hands, a scroll that contains all of human history and what is to come; this is a lamb with seven horns that depict His irresistible might and seven eyes that depict the completeness of His vision. The Lamb is at the centre of this vision, seated on the throne, the object of worship by people, angels, and all of creation.

The first people to read or hear this picture were Christians being persecuted for their faith; the Roman Empire had turned nasty; Christians were being thrown into prison simply for being Christians; some were being thrown to the lions or killed in other ways, martyrs for their faith; others were being pressed to give up their faith. They needed something to give them hope, to reassure them, to comfort them in their troubles. "How can we persevere? How can we hold faith in face of so many hardships?" This vision is God's answer.

Jesus is in charge! Jesus is King! Ultimately everything lies in Jesus' hands, so that even if, for a time, our enemies seem to have upper hand, or even if for a time, things seem hard and troublesome; even if for some death comes at a cruel hand – the Christian hope is that Jesus, His grace and the hope of glory will win the day. This is the very simple message of Revelation – Jesus is King; everything is in His hands; we need not be afraid! He who once laid down his life for us is now King!

Is this present or future? We think of Revelation as telling the future, but in fact it doesn't. It tells us what things are like now in places we can't see! Jesus is King now in heaven; we simply haven't seen that yet for ourselves, but it's true. Jesus is King now, but there are so many other things at work in our world either to undermine His kingship or prevent us from seeing that He is King! Jesus is King now; He is worthy of worship now.

New Year time is always full of uncertainties: there will be good news and difficult things; we simply don't know yet what they are. That kind of uncertainty makes us afraid. Jesus is King; the Lamb is on the throne; we need not be afraid.

The most famous part of *The Messiah* is perhaps the Hallelujah Chorus that puts Revelation 19:15,16 to music, but the piece actually ends with these words from Revelation 5:12,13: "*Worthy...*"

The Voice in Isaiah 40 looks forward to the glory of the Lord being revealed; John the Baptist is the signpost to Jesus, the lamb of God who takes away the sin of the world; the story ends with the lamb on the throne, king for ever, and worthy of praise, honour, glory and power. This is our Jesus, to be celebrated, to be worshipped, to be trusted, for all the year long!