

ISAIAH 9:2-7  
WHAT HAS LOVE GIVEN...?

"I wish I knew how it would feel to be free, I wish I could break all the chains holdin' me". These are the first couple of lines of a song by the Lighthouse Family; it goes on to talk about the chains that hold people down and how we can be free. I've used that song to go alongside pictures from Cambodia of people who are poor, people who have very little and depend on people to help them, or who depend on the fickle weather to provide crops. People all over the world long to be free from that kind of poverty and that kind of fear. If I were to ask you about freedom, what would it be from which you long to be free? Do you long to be free from your past? Is there a sense of regret, a sense of guilt, that dogs you everywhere you go? Do you long to be free from your present, the difficult things that you're facing and you wish they would simply go away and not be issues any more? Do you long to be free from the fear of the future, its uncertainty, insecurity? This week has all been about fear and how we can be free from fear and yet also be safe and secure; our friends in Brussels are not able to worship today because the city is in lockdown, for fear; pray that they be free from that fear. So many of us, have so many fears; they bring us down so much. Darkness stalks the world; darkness grips our hearts and the hearts of so many; Jesus is the light of world! Jesus spells freedom!

I love the story of Zaccheus; it was the first story I ever preached as a budding preacher; he is such a fascinating character and Jesus treats him so well. Zaccheus needed freedom and maybe there is a sense that he realised that; why would he want to see Jesus if there wasn't something in him that wanted something more from life? He was a tax collector and was under the control of the Roman authorities, needing to do what they wanted; he was a thief and had made himself rich at other people's expense; he was greedy and that's what made him do all of this. He was also a social outcast: nobody loved Zaccheus and so when he joined the crowd, he had to climb the tree, he could not see over their heads. When Jesus came and said "*Zaccheus, come...*" (Luke 19:5) the crowd thought this was awful, that Jesus should have tea with such a person. But the outcome of tea for Zaccheus was freedom: "*Look, Lord...*" (Luke 19:8f) Zaccheus is set free from all that has held him in his chains: he is no longer greedy, but is a changed man inside; he is no longer a thief, but gives away his money to the poor and pays it back to his victims! The changed man will no longer be outcast. Zaccheus is set free and Jesus calls it salvation. He is overjoyed; what a smile on his face!

We're beginning today a little series in which, looking through the season of Advent which starts next week, we will see something of the big picture of God's mission to the world and see how the birth and the coming of Jesus fits in with these mission plans of God. We will be amazed at the extent of God's love in sending Jesus, at the passionate commitment of God to us and to world, and how that passionate commitment finds its focus in the coming of Jesus. Stand back and see what God is doing. He is sending His Son; He is achieving salvation; He is changing the world; He is changing lives; He is bringing a new sense of freedom to the world. We're going to read some familiar words, as we always do at this time of year, but take a little time to dig below the surface to uncover a little more of what these words mean.

We start today with a piece that was written some 700 years before Jesus came; these words are full of hope, full of promise and deep down full of joy. We'll have the chance to see where this hope comes from, what these promises are all about, why joy is at the heart of this hope and promise. The whole point of this piece is to tell people about a child: God will send a child, a son, who will come into the world to be a great King and this King will have all kinds of great titles and His kingship will be full

of all kinds of good things. Isaiah does what prophets often do: he speaks in the past tense: "*The people...*" (*Isaiah 9:2*) - it is done, the light has come; the people have seen that light. When God speaks, it is as good as done; because God has promised, it will happen, you can rely on God; so 700 years before, Isaiah promises the coming of Jesus and in Bethlehem, to Mary and Joseph, a son is born. God keeps His promises!

The centre of this passage comes at the end. "*To us...*" (*Isaiah 9:6f*) What a fuss when we discover an heir to the throne is on the way; can you remember the fuss outside the hospital when Prince George was born? There were cameras everywhere; there were crowds outside the hospital; everyone going in was cheered and asked their opinion; when the baby came out his picture was flashed round the world in an instant; live, breaking news was streamed across the planet; the heir to the throne is born and we are overjoyed! That's the kind of idea here; Isaiah promises an heir to the throne, to David's throne, a new king who will be born and we are overjoyed. At least we should be overjoyed; we read these words so often and read them at Christmas and maybe they lose their force, so today, let them recover their force and let us appreciate God's passionate commitment to the world in the promise of a child; of course, not just any child.

This is about a King: "*the government...He will reign...*" (*Isaiah 9:6,7*) He will be David's heir and if you trace Jesus' family tree it will take you back to King David; by bloodline, Jesus is David's heir. But His Kingship is much more than that. Even Isaiah talks about Him as a king forever and that His kingdom will have its qualities of justice and righteousness. There is more to aspire to here than simply a king who will be like David, great though David was. Alongside other promises, these words inspired a hope in Israel that the Messiah would be a greater King who would bring the Kingship of God to Israel in a whole new way and God would bless His people. Jesus came proclaiming the kingdom of God; it is near, it is here, it is among you, it is within you. Some wanted Him to be king to throw the Romans out and lead a great army; he was not that kind of King.

"*He will...*" (*Isaiah 9:6*) There is something about these titles that takes us above and beyond the simple heir to the throne. The child will be given titles that are much, much bigger than anything even David was given. We are given clues here to the scale of what Isaiah promises: all four of these titles connect this child with God; all four of them speak of qualities that belong only to God and so we have been persuaded that the child born in Bethlehem is on the one hand, David's blood line, but is also God become a human being; that Jesus is David's Son and God's Son at one and the same time. He will have wisdom to counsel; He will have the power of God; He will live for ever; He will bring peace, shalom to the world. Grasp something of the scale of this promise: this is far more than the birth notice in the Court Circular of Times that announced the birth of Prince George; this is the birth announcement of the Son of God into the world, of the eternal God coming to live in our neighbourhood as a human being. This is massive! This is huge! This is world-transforming! This is life-changing!

Why does God bother? There might be an argument that says we're not worth the effort on God's part, that our reaction and response to Jesus has proved that the world was not worth the effort. But Isaiah sees something different: "*The zeal...*" (*Isaiah 9:7*) This is God's "passionate commitment" to us and to the world; this is what God is like; He loves the world so much that He wants to do this for us; He is passionately committed to us and to our well-being; He is passionately committed to save the world and to bless the world that He would go to all of these lengths for our sake. It is quite extraordinary, that the eternal God who created the universe, should

love you and me enough to come and live here, on this planet, in our human society, knowing that He would be rejected, that He would suffer and die on a cross. This is the extraordinary love that God has for us; see the scale of this promise, see the scale of His love for us.

An oppressed people in their past, God set them free. There was a time when they were hiding their food; they were turning winepresses into hidden grain mills to protect their food from Midian's raiders. God called Gideon and when Gideon and his small army defeated Midian, the people rejoiced that God set them free; the burden of fear that was wearing them down was gone; they were free and they rejoiced. God will again set people free from all the burdens across our shoulders; from all the yokes that wear people down, Jesus sets us free. If it is the past that burdens us and we are weighed down with guilt for our past failures and mistakes, Jesus offers us forgiveness; "He died that we might be forgiven", He died to set us free from our past. If it is the present that burdens us, Jesus promises to be with us always and everywhere, to help us, to make us strong, to equip us to deal with everything that life throws at us, to give us grace sufficient, to give us courage. The question is asked "where was God on Friday night when terror visited on streets of Paris?" He was right there, among the suffering, among the victims. If you want to know why He didn't stop it, that's whole other question and there is an answer; I can talk to you later about that, if you like. If it is the future that makes us scared, uncertain, insecure, then Jesus promises that He has all of our times in His hands. An oppressed people are set free. The yoke across our shoulders that wears us down is broken and we are free.

We don't want to show our emotions too much, do we? We're supposed to be dour Scots, and keep our emotions hidden and certainly not get too enthusiastic about something, except maybe at a football match? Especially, we don't want to get too carried away with joy in our faith because that seems a bit too enthusiastic, but also we have this idea that we don't get too happy because something will come along in a while to burst our balloon! Let me say, here is something to give us a deep reason to be full of joy, and nothing can take that away from us. Here is a reason to rejoice with all our heart; here is a reason for joy that undergirds all of life and that sustains us even in the days when we feel sad and when life is hard. This is not about being happy all the time, but we have sense that God is good and has been good and we are glad to know Jesus. Throw aside Scottish dourness and let your hearts be glad to know Jesus.

Darkness is about everything that is wrong with the world; evil is around; we have sinned; darkness has entered the world and darkness has entered our souls. But rejoice: light has come into the world and we are free. The world is changed because Jesus has come; we are changed because Jesus has come; life is better because of Jesus; the Prince of Peace brings Shalom - life at its best with God. How many reasons do we need to rejoice? We celebrate! We are free because Jesus has come into the world: has been born, has died, is raised, the Saviour of the World, King forever. God has done this. This is the passionate commitment God has to us, and to the world; glory be to God!