

**NORTH BALWYN UNITING CHURCH  
EASTER SUNDAY  
SUNDAY 31 MARCH 2013  
Rev. Anneke Oppewal  
Isaiah 65: 17-25; Luke 24: 1-12**



**“No More the Sound of Weeping”**

The book of Isaiah, from which we read a passage this morning, can be subdivided in three, or maybe even four parts, each of which biblical scholars believe was written by different writers, over a period of at least two hundred years. They are held together by a unity of vision and style, and divided by differences in language, and references to historic occasions.

They span a period of great upheaval in the history of the Jewish people. Both bad and pious it spans the reigns of the kings Uzziah (bad), Jotham (not so bad), Ahaz (positively evil), through to the Hezekiah (pious too late). From a small, but independent and influential Kingdom on one of the crossroads of the ancient Mediterranean world to a nation completely destroyed by the political clashes between the two major world powers of the day, Assyria and Egypt, with its people taken into exile and then finally to their return home two centuries later the book covers the breathtakingly diverse ups and downs of a nation that always, somehow, seems to end up at the centre of the action between the powerful.

And if we look at present day Palestine, and its surrounding areas, we have to unfortunately agree nothing much has changed with war and upheaval still very much on the charts for those living in the area.

Living in this environment the writers of Isaiah go through, what we may call, with a bit of license, an Easter experience. The book starts with passionate pleas to the kings who no longer serve their people, as God has decreed they should, but have instead become the very cruel Eastern potentates who disregard the wellbeing of his people to benefit his every whim.

With words like:

*“Wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before my eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, rescue the oppressed, defend the orphan, plead for the widow.”*

the writer calls upon the kings to abandon their wicked ways and return to the law, to the ideal of the righteous King who serves his people that was given by God.

The pleas of the prophets grow more intense, and desperate, over time. For a short time, during Jotham’s reign, things seem to look up a little, but with Ahaz things get progressively worse again, until Hezekiah once more tries to turn things around, but finds his nation obliterated by the Assyrians he decides to rebel against.

Desperate times and messy politics, with the weak and the vulnerable suffering because of it. As I said, nothing has changed. In Syria it’s the women and children who suffer more than anybody else from the devastation of war, on the westbank it’s the poor, the elderly and the sick who suffer most from the isolationist politics of Israel, in North Korea it’s the ordinary people who pay with poverty and hardship for the weapons that make the war-mongery of their leaders possible.

Through the book we see the writers go through various stages of grief, anger and despair at the way the world works. Raging against injustice and suppression at one moment, the book loses itself in lament over the fate of God's people the next. The experience of the writers of this book is that the world is a bad place, with human endeavour only marginally able to make a dent in the amount of pain and grief that fills it with suffering, injustice, and despair.

It is the experience of Holy Week and Good Friday we will probably all be able to recognise in one way or another. Life, the world, is a bugger, not some of the time, but most of the time if you stop to think about it. There is always war, hunger, suffering, injustice, grief, or pain somewhere. If it is not in our own lives, than it will be from the lives of others we hear cries of lament and despair. And human endeavour, no matter how hard we try, doesn't seem to be making much progress in making the world a better place.

This is, however, not where Isaiah, the prophet, the person who speaks for God, ends. After going through the whole gamut of depression and despair that anybody who takes the longing for a whole and peace-filled world seriously, will go through, he ends up in a positive, hope-filled place, we read about this morning.

*"no more shall the sound of weeping be heard (in it), or the cry of distress.  
No more shall there be in it an infant that lives but a few days,  
or an old person who does not live out a lifetime;  
for one who dies at a hundred years will be considered a youth,  
and one who falls short of a hundred will be considered accursed.  
They shall build houses and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit.  
They shall not build and another inhabit; they shall not plant and another eat;  
for like the days of a tree shall the days of my people be,  
and my chosen shall long enjoy the work of their hands.  
They shall not labor in vain, or bear children for calamity;  
for they shall be offspring blessed by the Lord — and their descendants as well.  
Before they call I will answer, while they are yet speaking I will hear.  
The wolf and the lamb shall feed together, the lion shall eat straw like the ox;  
but the serpent—its food shall be dust!  
They shall not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain, says the Lord."*

That is Easter.

To come, through anguish and despair, through the reality of a world where violence and death kill innocent people and poverty, calamity, war and hardship always seem to hit the weakest and the most vulnerable the hardest, to a place where light breaks through like the dawn of a beautiful new day, or new life escapes from a seedpod that bursts open under the intense heat of a bushfire, or green shoots up in the middle of the desert after only a few drops of promising rain.

It's about realising that although a lot is wrong with the world and human endeavour seems to be pretty useless in the face of it a lot of the time, that there is a force, a power at work that is able to overcome even the worst of it. A power we believe was embodied in Jesus Christ, in whom the power of love of others, of justice, of service to others, of faith and trust in God alone, proved to be stronger than death and despair.

However hard it is to believe at times, and it was even then, somehow what he stood for didn't die, and we find it alive among us today if we are prepared to open ourselves to it and believe that it is possible, the wolf and the lamb together, nobody dying before their time, and that we are called to work on it, not alone, but together with the divine will and imagination that has dreamed of a different way of being from the beginning of time and, even where we may be tempted to give up, we will not.

Amen.