

Sunday 26th August 2018
The Hope of the Nations
Ps. 115.1-11, Isaiah 32.9-20

The Bible declares that God is the creator and sustainer of the world. It declares God to be the Majestic Ruler of all peoples and everything else. The Nations are established by Him, He raises one up and puts down another. He rules as absolute Sovereign. He is not absent or disinterested in His creation, but loves it because it is all from Him. From Genesis to Revelation He declares and directs His purposes, and nothing can thwart them. Sin is not mightier than He is. Sin had hardly entered the world, Adam and Eve have hardly begun to feel the sting of death due to sin, but God comes and seeks for them, and out of pure grace, gives His promise of salvation.

Despite the depths of depravity soon reached, despite the defacing of the image of God in mankind, God chooses a holy line, a line of people that He would choose and make holy, Noah, Abraham and the Patriarchs. Pharaoh cannot destroy Moses, the Nations mightier than Israel cannot destroy them, God's purposes flow on despite the idolatry and rebellion, faithlessness and wickedness of His people. These cannot defeat God's plans.

God has sworn by His own Name, He has made covenant and given it to His people. He takes Sovereign responsibility to bring His plan to perfection, to have a People for Himself, holy, devoted, and blameless. God has not promised that this world as it is will be our home. He has not said that all the wrongs will be righted, or the destruction undone, except through the New Creation. Therefore, if we think that God has promised to restore this world, patch it up, we are missing the scope of what God has promised, and are barking up the wrong tree! This is where the secularist and materialist go so wrong. This world will never be a utopia. Jesus said that as long as this present world continues there will be wars and rumours of wars.

This should not lead us to passivity, despair and disinterest in the present life, but it should make us think how we are using our time, energy and money. We should learn what is lasting and invest these three precious gifts in things that will last.

The history of the Christian Church is that it has done great good in health care, education, poor relief, and prison reform. The Church has stood against social injustice, slavery, child labour, working relations and poverty and so on. However none of the great reformers in these areas were ever under any illusion that these changes were in any way the Kingdom of God. They did what they did because the love of God to them gave rise to love for mankind in them. These works for social reform were the fruit of the Kingdom working in the lives of these men and women, not the Kingdom itself. Read the biographies of these men and women. We will find them girding themselves up in Bible meditation and prayer. They were looking for a better city, and a better country, the one that is above and the one to come. In the meantime they did what they could to alleviate the miserable fruit of sin in the lives of others.

Herod could not destroy the Child Christ, the Pharisees could not overthrow God's plan even by killing Christ. The Church was born in a day even as the Nation of Israel was born in a day. Neither the wrath of Roman Caesars nor persecution by Rome or any other tyrant, the wrath of governments, false religions, false prophets, Chairman Mal, Russian Communism, Western Materialism or anything else has or will frustrate the purposes of God, because He is supreme and sovereign over peoples and nations. This we can lean on absolutely!

There are two ways that peoples transgress against God. Jeremiah 2. Verse 13 is a sobering passage. Through the mouth of the prophet Jeremiah, God laments about His people. They had committed two sins, which were the seed bed for countless other sins. Isaiah 1 verse 4 and following speaks of a people loaded with guilt, so sin sick that they are covered in disease internally and externally from their heads to the tips of their toes! Tell me what NHS, NGO, or other body can cure such disease? Nothing but the shed blood of Christ can bring a balm to this!

The two sins which are the mother of all others consist in two these things.

1. Idolatry – forsaking God, and turning to other gods. Yet the false gods are nothing. Isaiah 44 verses 14-17 speaks in mocking tones about those false gods and those who trust in them. The punch line of this passage is that the wood that cooked the meal did more good than the wood that was crafted into an idol! An idol does not need to be a statue, it just so happened that the gods of the nations the Israelites turned to were expressed in this visible form. We would be surprised at the number of nations that actually adorn idol statues, from the Far East to South America, and everywhere in between. It is horrible that so many garden centers sell images of buda and other pagan entities. If you have them in your homes or gardens, get rid of them.

An idol is anything we expend our energies, resources, time and place our hope in. The Bible calls the love of money an idol, but anything that replaces God in our lives is a false god to us, an idol.

2. Alliances with others when they should hold true to God. Isaiah 30. Verses 1-3. Abandoning God's person and his ways and trusting in our own abilities or those of others constitutes this activity. We are a nation, which at the moment, is almost completely confused about treaties and alliances. The whole leaving of the European Community, be you for it or against it, is an example of the complex muddle we can get into when we seek to secure our welfare by political, social, economic or military means. If we rely wholly on these, it is certain that we have departed from God and are trusting in our own calculations. The Bible calls this, 'leaning on the arm of flesh.'

We do not need to read much of the book of Isaiah to see that when the people departed from God and sought alliances with other nations, that God took a dim view of this and the disaster these alliances proved to be! This does not mean that trade and

relations with other nations is forbidden, but it does mean that we must not imbibe godlessness as part of the relationship!

If we end up trusting our own ability to secure our wellbeing, without first reference to God, then we are guilty of making our own cisterns which will prove to be broken and unable to hold water. Think of the multitude of treaties that have come and have failed or been broken! The motto of the Stock Exchange used to be, 'My word is my bond.' Now I suspect it needs to be altered to, 'My word is my bond, until I get found out!' Think of the Road Map to Peace in the Middle East. It would seem that the Sat Nav went wrong here! What hope then is there for the Good Friday Agreement which was modelled on the Road Map? We do not hear much news from Northern Ireland today, but stuff still goes on, bad stuff!

This just about sums up human history, our attempts by military, economic, political and social alliances to 'make the world a better place.'

Isaiah 32. Verse 15 tells us that until God acts, until the hearts of men are changed, anything we do will only be a sticking plaster on the wound. By all means sent £5 a month to this charity and that, by all means volunteer to alleviate the misery that seems to be ever present in the world, but for every minute we act or give, spend an hour in seeking holiness and in prayer, for it is only the Holy Spirit of the Sovereign Lord who can save humanity.

What is required for Syria to change, Korea, Africa, Jew, Arab, or citizen of the UK to change? For real change to occur, at the depth necessary, that of the heart it requires the Sovereign outpouring of the Holy Spirit. When the Holy Spirit is poured out on a community, and an individual, people are born again, made into new people with a seed of a new life within them. It does not instantly produce perfect people, but people who have been given the capacity by God to be changed by His Spirit. Whenever this happens to a significant minority in a society, it precipitates change in that society. Christians within society act as salt and light. Salt preserves from corruption caused by the free flow of sin. Light illuminates and shows another way. This way may have to be presented and argued for in Parliament, as the abolition of slavery was. It also requires the continuation of the presence of salt and light. It is not surprising that as the presence of Christians in a nation diminishes, all these old evils resurface, albeit under a different name. Slavery is now called people trafficking.

Two examples of this from the UK.

The Methodist movement, associated with the names of John and Charles Wesley, though there were other preachers, even greater preachers than these about in the same days. Many historians believe that the fate of England was averted from revolution by this evangelical revival. A brief reading of Bready, 'England before and after Wesley,' presents the case for this. England did not fall into bloodshed and revolution, unlike France, which suffered many hard and bloody days.

What do we make of General Booth and the Salvation Army? A shadow of what it once was, but in its day, it rescued men women and children from the consequences of the abuse of alcohol, and many other vices that arose as a consequence. It was not a social work that accomplished this, it was the Gospel and the love of God that was at the core of what the Salvation Army did. It was the fruit of salvation, changed hearts and lives that transformed people.

What then can we do? We must get the priorities clear in our minds and hearts and stick to them.

Pursue holiness, pray, intercede to the Lord of the nations, for Jew and Gentile and Arab, to work His glorious purposes. Ask for God to pour out the Holy Spirit on peoples and nations, not least our own. This will do more and greater good than anything else we can think or do. Finally, do not neglect to give and do good when we can, but do not neglect to pray for the outpouring of the Holy Spirit.