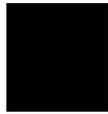


Jubilee Church Devotional Booklet

Lent 2021

Isaiah 56-66





Prologue

The Lent materials for this year will draw from the same text as the materials for 2017: Isaiah 55-66. This is because our sermons for Advent, towards the end of 2020, expounded on the gospel of Luke; likewise, the gospel of Luke is being shared in the sermons for Lent 2021. In order to better understand the gospel of Luke, we will need a good understanding of the book of Isaiah. Armed with the knowledge provided by the sermons in 2020 on the book of Kings and the minor prophets, we are re-visiting the book of Isaiah again, as we are now in a better position to appreciate the verses.

In 2017, the world was affected by ISIS' rise to power and attacks; this

was followed by bombings in Syria to quell the ISIS forces. For the cover picture then, we chose a picture of a Syrian city after the bombings. On one hand, we stood in solidarity with those who were suffering in Syria and the affected countries. On the other hand, we also understood, through these events, what the Israelites faced as a small country under larger and more powerful adversaries. We began to experience how the ancient Israelites remained faithful to God through the tough times.

From January 2020, we grappled with COVID-19. This virus, though unseen, spread widely among people of all ages, and caused disruptions across societies, economies, and families. To deal with this crisis, we had to go through the process of re-inventing and re-learning. Hence, for this cover page, we chose a picture of a potter. A potter creates his/her handiwork through repeated shaping of the work; in the same way, we appreciate the process and effort of being repeatedly remoulded throughout our life journey. In the book of Isaiah, we do read of such a prayer – God is the

potter, and we are in his hands.

For this set of materials, we have made minor adjustments, and added portions for self-reflection and prayer.

Ash Wednesday

Luke

20:20-26

Day 1

17
/
02

Read Gospel of Luke 20:20-26

²⁰ Then they watched him carefully and sent spies who pretended to be sincere. They wanted to take advantage of what he might say so that they could deliver him up to the authority and jurisdiction of the governor. ²¹ Thus they asked him, "Teacher, we know that you speak and teach correctly, and show no partiality, but teach the way of God in accordance with the truth.

²² Is it right for us to pay the tribute tax to Caesar or not?" ²³ But Jesus perceived their deceit and said to them, ²⁴ "Show me a denarius. Whose image and inscription are on it?" They said, "Caesar's." ^w So he

said to them, "Then give to Caesar the things that are Caesar's, and to God the things that are God's."

²⁶ Thus they were unable in the presence of the people to trap him with his own words. And stunned by his answer, they fell silent.





Special article on Ash Wednesday

Our church started to observe Ash Wednesday from 2010 to commemorate the beginning of Lent. But why is this day called Ash Wednesday?

Ash Wednesday derives its name from the placing of repentance ashes on the foreheads of participants while uttering either the words “Repent, and believe in the Gospel” or the dictum “Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return.”[5] The ashes are prepared by burning palm leaves from the previous year’s Palm Sunday celebrations.

The practice of fasting during the Lent period varies depending on different church traditions. In the Church of England,

the entire forty days of Lent are designated days of fasting, while the 1662 Book of Common Prayer states that: “Fasting, usually meaning not more than a light breakfast, one full meal, and one half meal, on the forty days of Lent.” In the Roman Catholic Church, between Ash Wednesday and Good Friday, Roman Catholics between the ages of 18 and 59 (whose health allows them to do so) are permitted to consume one full meal, along with two smaller meals, which together should not equal the full meal.

As for our own church members, we suggest reducing your food consumption by one meal during a day of fasting and donating the cost of that meal as charity to the poor. You can choose

to fast once per week, or fast more than once during the Lent period. During the fasting period, the focus is on communion with our Lord, and through not consuming food, to identify with those who are living below the poverty line.

We also choose to use the act of “burying the Hallelujah” to signify the beginning of the Lent period. Thereafter, for worships on the subsequent six Sundays, we will deliberately avoid hymns which have the word “Hallelujah”. Through such a conscious act, we learn to maintain a low-key lifestyle during the Lent period, knowing that our Lord Jesus Christ’s passion is our main focus.

Our church uses the cycle of four gospels to celebrate Advent

and Lent, and the Word to shepherd our congregation, so that each year we are engaged with the Scripture and reflect upon how our Lord Jesus Christ incarnated and lived a human life like us; he gave his life for us, and was eventually raised by God the Father. And the Word became flesh and dwelt among us, and we have seen his glory, glory as of the only Son from the Father, full of grace and truth.

Isaiah

56:1-2

Isaiah 56-66 promises yet another renewing of creation. When creation is fully renewed, Israel will display an ideal version of the known order of created human life. This is the essence of God's salvation and deliverance: that we may live as a people at peace with God and also with one another. And when we do, there is life and vitality. There is a repeated word in verse 1, translated either as righteousness or faithfulness. God urged the people to have "righteousness/ faithfulness" and he would correspondingly reveal his "righteousness/ faithfulness". This repeated word undergirds the ideal relationship within a community, and between God and us. We are bound by our ties to one another and through our words and deeds we honour and strengthen those ties. In the same way, God acts in faithfulness and righteousness when he stays true to his promises to his people. In this period of Lent, let this be our hope and vision: we wish for the day when God restores order on earth as it is in heaven.

And before all this is fulfilled, we the people of God must be on guard. First, we guard our judgments. During Isaiah's days,

this would refer to the judicial systems in protecting the vulnerable. Today, we continue to build a society where people can thrive in their individuality as well as support one another collectively. Lent is a time when we remember the needy with almsgiving. Secondly, we guard the Sabbath. In the strictest sense, it is about refraining from working on the day of the Sabbath. Read Nehemiah 13:15-22. Nehemiah was enforcing the ban on commercial activities on the Sabbath. However, it is crucial that we also interpret this while being mindful about making judgments, lest we become legalistic about Sabbath laws. Sabbath is a weekly reminder of God's act of creation, and we rest to enjoy God's grace and providence. We do not work for our own gains, but we must continue to facilitate rest for the needy, such as those in pain from sickness, or those who are restless in harsh living conditions. Lastly, we guard our hands. This is a reminder to stay away from evil. God is coming.

Isaiah

56:3-5

First, a little background on eunuchs: many of us are familiar with the eunuchs of the Chinese dynasties. They typically were either prisoners or drafted from poor families. They served the practical need of having male servants in the royal household. With lots of concubines and female servants in the palace, castration was the obvious but cruel solution to protecting the royal bloodline. It was a similar situation in the Ancient Near East. Given the importance of passing on the family name, no one would willingly serve as a eunuch. Yet the royal household also wanted capable and educated people serving them. Hence, many eunuchs were actually spoils of war from defeated royal households. See Isaiah 39:5-7. It was likely that many descendants of Hezekiah might have become eunuchs when they were exiled to Babylon.

The Mosaic law on eunuchs is clearly stated in Deuteronomy 23:1. "No one who has been emasculated by crushing or cutting may enter the assembly of the Lord." Eunuchs could not become members of the Israelite community, much less enter the place of worship. If this were true

for the descendants of Hezekiah, it would represent a hopeless situation for them and for the royal line of David. But now in God's new creation, they represented hope. Above and beyond communal acceptance, God gave them an everlasting name within the temple. They could enter the assembly; they could even enter to worship in the holy temple. Typically, it would be the descendants of a person who would carry the family name and keep memories of him alive within a community. The childless would have to resort to erecting a pillar as a monument for remembrance, if they could even afford it. (See 2 Samuel 18:18) But in this divinely bestowed grace, God himself would remember these childless eunuchs within the temple itself.

This grace is intertwined with these eunuchs' faithfulness to God. They had guarded the Sabbath and pleased God with their lives. God kept faith with them. This reciprocal relationship becomes a reminder for us of the boundless possibilities of new creation when we choose to honour the covenant between man and God. In living by God's will, God blesses his people with hope for the hopeless and eternal life for the dead.

Isaiah

56:6-8

God's declaration of salvation was tied to the reminder of those who guarded the Sabbath. But how far did his grace extend? Given the many rules of Israel on purity, one might conclude that there might be many unstated exceptions to the declaration. God's answer however, removed all doubts of any hidden exception clauses; this promise of deliverance was extended to all, even to the eunuchs, even to the foreigners. "All who keep the Sabbath without desecrating it and who hold fast to my covenant, these I will bring to my holy mountain and give them joy in my house of prayer." If even the eunuchs and the foreigners were included in the salvation plans of God, then this good news is now truly for all.

This has a great impact on God's action of gathering his people. It was no longer just the Jews in exile. They included "foreigners who bind themselves to the Lord to minister to him, to love the name of the Lord, and to be his servants" (v.6). This was a critical difference from the actions in Nehemiah 13:3 "When the people heard this law, they excluded from Israel all who were of foreign

descent.” The Nehemiah context parallels with the scolding in Ezekiel 44:7-9, “you brought foreigners uncircumcised in heart and flesh into my sanctuary”. In contrast, the foreigners mentioned in Isaiah 56 had taken steps to commit themselves to God, possibly even undergoing circumcision. Therefore, to the foreigners who were willing to become the servants of God, God reciprocated by gathering them in Jerusalem, even into his holy Temple. In committing themselves to God, God committed into a relationship with them.

In Mark 11:17, Jesus referenced Isaiah 56:7 in calling the Temple “a house of prayer for all nations”. It was clear why he was upset with the temple authorities. God’s restoration was about gathering all the committed people in worship. He would listen to their prayers and bring joy to the land. Such faithfulness between God and man was how the nations would be blessed. No wonder Jesus was enraged that such a wondrous vision of God was abused for selfish gains. May this time of Lent remind us of our commitment to God as his faithful and worshipful servants.

Isaiah

56:9-12

Isaiah 56:9-59:8 (Days 5-14) addresses the Israelites in Jerusalem. 56:9 demarcates from the earlier verses, and 56:9-57:2 is a passage reprimanding the leadership of the people.

The way God had chosen to discipline his people was to allow the invasion of foreigners. The word “beasts” in verse 9 was also used by the other Prophets to describe the enemies who invaded Israel (see Jer. 12:9-10; 27:6; Eze. 31:6,13; 34:5,8).

When the people were facing foreign invasion, the leaders were insensitive and apathetic. Verses 10-12 describe their lifestyles of hedonism and carelessness towards danger. Not only so, but their privileged status also corrupted them. Verse 11 said “They are shepherds who lack understanding; they all turn to their own way, they seek their own gain.” This fully expressed that they did not know God, and thus did not lead the people by his word. The leadership included the royals, officials, and religious leaders.

Though we cannot be absolutely sure about the context, we know that as the people of God, the Israelites were a faith

community (unlike the other people). Their living must reflect a belonging to God, namely, a people focused on worshipping God and following his word.

May the “shepherds” of this world be vigilant always. Their dereliction of duty would misguide the people. We pray for them to be responsible, to be aware of the big picture, and to be a blessing to the people with wisdom from above. We are thankful that God watches over his people’s needs. When necessary, he dismisses the incompetent to reign over and shepherd us personally.

Isaiah

57:1-2

The watchmen and shepherds became people who lived as they wished and sought their own gains. They were not aware of the times, assumed that things were going well, and indulged in material luxuries. Even if God had not intervened through discipline, such a nation would eventually deteriorate or be taken over by others.

After disciplining these leaders, God pointed out that the righteous and devout would be gradually taken away. It would appear that these people had been destroyed by their enemies, but under God's intervention, the departure of the righteous and honest would be a more peaceful end than those who would eventually face the violent attacks of their invaders (beasts), and be met with a bloody end.

At this stage, even as they were taken away quietly and remembered only by the prophets, their departure and return to God was peaceful. This peaceful departure was also reflected in various Old Testament texts (Genesis 15:15), where they were spared from going through tumultuous times.

If a society is evil and morally

deficient, our sanctity has little use; we may be led to follow the same path as those who are corrupt. This is especially when the victims are unable to obtain vindication despite their struggles to prove their innocence, which makes them more susceptible to do evil as per their oppressors.

This passage reminds us that God is always watching and preparing a place of rest for those who are righteous and devout. Physical death is not the final stage, and God plans for us thereafter. The sanctity of the righteous is ultimately given by God. Death does not imply that evil has the final say. In the New Testament, through Jesus, God also made promises. John 14: 1-3 "Do not let your hearts be troubled. You believe in God[a]; believe also in me. 2 My Father's house has many rooms; if that were not so, would I have told you that I am going there to prepare a place for you? 3 And if I go and prepare a place for you, I will come back and take you to be with me that you also may be where I am.

Lord, thank you for not forsaking your people and showing us how a faith community belonging to God should live. May we live according to your will.

Isaiah

57:3-10

57:3-13 continues the topic of the daily living of God's people in 56:1-8. The key lies in directly addressing the people. They were called "children of a sorceress, offspring of adulterers and prostitutes". According to the descriptions in verses 5-10, this reflected their deviance from their faith and their unfaithfulness to God.

The people were supposed to be children of God, but at that moment, the prophet addressed them as children of a sorceress to stress to them that they had followed pagan worship! The relationship between God and his people had been expressed in the forms of father and son, husband and wife, and also as a covenant to show mutual commitment to each other.

Hence, when the people followed the culture of pagan worship, these acts were considered as acts of disloyalty and betrayal to God! Words such as "adultery" in the passage were not used to describe the moral depravity in pagan worship, but to reiterate God's reprimand of his people's unfaithfulness to him, like the unfaithful wife in a marriage! Of course, the people's pagan worship

also involved forms that were detestable to God, such as child sacrifice!

The harsh reprimand from God regarding the people's pagan worship was not directed at the immoral practices; hence, if we interpret them solely based on moral grounds, we would miss out on the essence of the faith of the Old Testament!

May we reflect on how we worship God. The reprimand from God through his prophet should be our warning today. We can reflect on how our worship expresses our faithfulness to God. Do our praises, prayers and hymns reflect our daily living? Have our values been paganized? Let us return to God in repentance, to live a life as a child of God.

Isaiah

57:11-13

God reprimanded the people for being disloyal and superficial to him. They were fake and uncommitted in loving God! The people were the subjects of God's love; God promised to watch over them. God made a covenant with them, and promised to always be their God. God belonged to the people and they belonged to God. This relationship was neither a transaction of mutual benefits nor a contract. The people of Israel were not worthy to sign a contract with God. God established a relationship with them because of love!

Furthermore, since Exodus, the Israelites' existence was also accomplished entirely by God! Henceforth, the people's lives could only be sustained based on the premise of faithfulness to God. God wished to create a people ideal to his heart in a depraved world.

In this case, we can understand that the pagan worship of the people was not just a change or choice of religious practice, nor a situation of religious variety. When you are clear about this, you can understand why God was upset about seemingly immoral behaviour in some pagan practices. The passage clearly spelt out that

it was because of their hypocrisy and unfaithfulness! Therefore, God reprimanded his people and acted to punish them!

After the harsh reprimands, the passage ended with “whoever takes refuge in me will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain.” Ultimately, God wanted to let those who belonged to him, sought after him and believed in him, live intimately with him!

May the final promise in the passage continue to encourage us. We should trust in God. He is willing to have a lasting relationship with us. The basis of our faith is his word.

Isaiah

57:14-16

God continued to speak on the corrupt behaviour of the people (in the early days of Manasseh's reign) and the hostility and evilness of society. The contents in 57:14-21 differ from the two earlier passages. Besides disciplining and punishing the rebellious people in sin, God also wanted to heal and restore them.

If not for the determination of God to extend his salvation and healing, who else could have shown a way of deliverance? For hundreds of years, these people had taken the rebellious path, and had set up stumbling blocks for themselves since the beginning of the nation. Is it possible for them to clear the obstacles in their path and get rid of this entanglement?

We might interpret the people who needed comfort and healing (in verse 15) as people who were humble and contrite towards God. But a better interpretation would be to describe these people as disheartened and disappointed. These were not people anticipating or waiting for God's salvation! They simply felt that they were hopeless.

v 17-18 In God's proclamation of grace to his people, the unique point was that, despite his obvious

anger, God wanted to deal with the situation of faint-heartedness and sin! To the rebellious people, besides using discipline, he wanted to bring restoration and healing. Even more noteworthy is that God's willing salvation did not come only after the people's repentant prayer; it came even before their plea. Possibly, many had become so distraught after God's discipline that they had lost all hope of salvation. But God did not give up, promising to heal and restore his people personally.

and we also believe that this will inevitably be the case for future generations.

Lord, we are grateful for your kindness! Your grace makes us prostrate before you. The pool of stagnant water had been hopeless, but with the power of the Creator, you have rekindled waves of vitality! If you had not taken the initiative to find us (Romans 5:6-11), what hope do we have? We see that in this predicament, it is you who cast light and abundance on us. May your unforgettable grace keep us trusting in you. May we always maintain unwavering faith in you.

Yes, as long as you are willing to reach out, nothing can separate us from God's love. Our history over the past few thousand years has confirmed this fact,

Isaiah

57:17-21

When faced with such a scenario, God clearly revealed himself to his people and presented his view of the people's problem. First, he said that he empathised with his people. On one hand, he stated his absolute difference from humanity (in honour, holiness and foresight); on the other hand, he placed himself amongst men to be their comfort and encouragement. Towards the greedy and wilful, God attacked in anger, but his wrath was not for long. In other words, anger is not God's nature, and his wrath was just a momentary response to the people's sin.

From the flood to the exile, if God were a wrathful god, the Israelites would have ceased to exist! After a period of discipline, God would save and heal them. The passage indicates that God was the initiator, executor and finisher of the restoration! He wanted to be their cause for praise (v.19). Besides God, there could be no other factors for their healing and restoration!

Based on the proclamation to "build up", "prepare the way" and "removing obstacles" (v.14), it looked like God would complete this himself. The God who was supreme high above would execute the

healing and restoration personally!

The way has been prepared. What are you waiting for? When faced with God's grace, we can only respond to his love and **accept his grace by transforming our lives and living a life of praise and peace.** We offer our lives to God; we entrust the community's restoration to him. When we are willing to respond to God, whether to his judgment or restoration, God's personal guidance shall be our greatest comfort. O Lord, we submit ourselves before you.

Isaiah

58:1-5

Chapter 58 revolves around one topic: what is worship? This seemingly simple and common statement is the most fundamental question in religion. People worship God because of their needs; when a person faces difficulties in life, they seek intervention from God to help them out of their situations. If the Israelites sought salvation from God when their nation was dying, God would not ignore or reject them. That said, God did not wish for the Israelites to remain in superficial and erroneous ways of worship and hoped that his people would be able to live in true faith.

From the text, it seems like the people had frequent and passionate religious activities of worship, even fasting. Fasting expresses heartfelt hurt, since a person is unable to eat when in anguish. Hence, in religious practices, it was often used to signify repentance. During their exile, God's people fasted, hoping that by doing so, they would gain God's forgiveness and restoration. When things did not change for the better, they lamented and questioned God. "Why have we fasted," they said, "and you have not seen it? Why have we humbled ourselves, and

you have not noticed?” God seemed unmoved and the people saw no returns for their actions.

In his response, God clearly pointed out the problems in the way that his people worshipped. He touched on two things that the people did: exploiting their workers and ignoring the needs of the disadvantaged. Worship that only includes religious activities, but not a change of lifestyle has no meaning. Lent is a time of introspection. Do not let our worship become meaningless, like going through the motions; even more so our daily living.

O Lord, teach us how to worship you sincerely. Let your truth and Spirit guide us. May the words from our mouths and meditation of our hearts be pleasing to you.

Isaiah

58:6-14

In the text, God reprimanded, explained and set expectations for his people. It reiterates God's intention of salvation, similar to that in the book of Exodus, where he revealed the Ten Commandments to his people. Connected to this was the understanding that God's people must live alongside one another and help one another live well in the Promised Land. This was the ideal living for Man! It was also the will of God in creation. The underlying principle of worship is hence to acknowledge God as Lord, our Creator. If God's people obeyed his word, it would lead to wonderful community living, just "like a well-watered garden, like a spring whose waters never fail." (v.11)

Worship is therefore unlike the common understanding of religious activities towards God. It is reverence and obedience to his will according to who he is. As God's people, they must be brought to God's ideal. In Sabbath, God is honored as God: "by not going your own way", "and not doing as you please or speaking idle words," and "find your joy in the Lord" (v.14)!

When we come to God in worship, we reflect upon life. Do we care for the neighbours who are in need? Someone who goes hungry, or someone who suffers in loneliness? When we fast and pray, and observe the Sabbath, we are putting God's will at the front of our lives. The way we treat domestic maids or foreign workers is something that God will look at first, before he hears us and accepts our worship; the same for how we protect children who are bullied, and how we forgive ex-offenders and help them get back on their feet. These are ways we worship God.

O Lord, you are the Lord of the Sabbath. We lay our lives before you. We relearn how to treat one another and how to express love in our relationships, so that others can find freedom, joy and vitality through us. May you use us as vessels to bestow grace. And may your blessings overflow amongst us.

Isaiah

59:1-4

Day 13

03

03

Even before Israel repented and changed for the better, God had already promised his restoration and grace. That said, at that moment, God was reprimanding the Israelite community for its depravity. The text shows us that the people were living in falsehood, distortions, unfairness, injustice, oppression, poison, violence and bloodshed. There was nothing that exemplified the positive traits of living as God had intended when he created the heavens and the earth (Gen. 1-2). The acts of the people of Israel were “anti-creation” behaviours. Last year, the news of an established businessman maligning his domestic worker of theft shook the country. This showed the impact of falsehoods, and emphasised the need for a fair justice system. The text reminds us that the building of a nation is difficult, and social justice is everyone’s responsibility.

The redemption of the Israelites to the Promised Land was to realise God’s will in his creation. The scene was described to resemble the time before the flood: it was corrupt in God’s sight and was full of violence. At this point, if God had not meted out punishment, the people would already be on a path of self-destruction. Since departing

Egypt to the Promised Land to becoming a nation, the people seemed to have reverted to the state before God started his salvation work. God's previous efforts seemed to have been in vain. God is not just a supernatural force to grant people's wishes. When his people are in sin, they did not look for God. Their sin drew them away from God.

*Prayer (from Psalm
6:1,4,8,9)*

*O LORD, do not rebuke me
in your anger or discipline
me in your wrath.*

*Turn, O LORD, and deliver
me; save me because of your
unfailing love.*

*Away from me, all you who
do evil, for the LORD has
heard my weeping.*

*The LORD has heard my cry
for mercy; the LORD accepts
my prayer.*

Isaiah

59:5-8

When “distancing” is mentioned, we immediately think of the covid-19 pandemic. To stem the transmission of the virus, some had to be quarantined for days, and they might have felt lonely and anxious. So, when one is distanced from the Creator God, what state would one be in?

Verses 5-8 describe the separation between God and Man during the time of Isaiah, and the descend into a state of sin.

‘Hatching the eggs of vipers’ refers to the scheming of evil plans. One would surely die from consuming these eggs, as would the victims of these evil plans. ‘Weaving cobwebs’ is a metaphor for hypocritical righteousness, as they could barely hide their sins from God. They busied themselves with evil, ran to execute their plans, and left others defenceless. They left a path of destruction and their tracks were signs of anti-creation.

God’s blessings for Man are full of abundance and vitality, like eternal life in the Garden of Eden, but Man chose a path of rebellion. They plotted to harm others, unknowingly distancing themselves from God and courting their doom.

These verses must have left a deep impression on Paul. He quoted them in Romans 3:9-20 as a reference to Jews and Gentiles living in sin.

When we are exposed to sinfulness for a prolonged period, we might grow accustomed to it, to the state of indifference. However, as God spoke through his prophet about such a state of affairs, can you feel his pain? The people that he called out of Egypt were to become a royal priesthood and a holy nation, but they became ignorant of peace and committed sins knowingly.

As we observe today's world, though we may all reside in different environments, let us slow down during this period of Lent to reflect: Does our society know the peace of God? If we encounter instances of bloodshed, would we be courageous enough to call for help? Would the scenarios of "no one calls for justice; no one pleads a case with integrity" (v.4) happen in our society?

Prayer: Lord, you are the foundation of our existence. Do not let sin separate us from you. Help us to turn towards you, to reconnect with you, and to live according to your will.

Isaiah

59:9-11

Readers will observe a change of the personal pronoun, from “they” to “we,” in the passage concerning the Indictment of Sins (Isaiah 59: 1-8) and the current text (59:9-15a).

Should anyone persist in doing wrongs instead of repenting, the majority would regard that person as despicable, one who was without moral conscience. However, at this juncture, the prophet shifted his position from that of a moral prosecutor to the stand of an accused, as he described the spillover effects of sins within the community.

What is “**Justice**”? In Hebrew, this word is commonly used **for polity and policies, particularly in situations where decisions are called for. Policies are meant to be implemented effectively and across the board.** However, if people tend to go around the policy or create loopholes, then the policy is considered futile. In organisations such as governments, schools or other public entities, their polity and policies are meant for dealing with situations, in order to offer a fair and impartial treatment. Should there be anyone who tries to be smart and circumvents polity and policies, the

governance will soon be considered as having collapsed or not in existence.

What then is “Righteousness”? **As the context of uprightness continues to be in force, God’s commitment and faithfulness towards mankind perseveres, and man’s truthfulness and integrity towards another fellow man remains.**

But when righteousness cannot catch up with us, it means that faithfulness between God-man, and between human beings is no longer traceable. More specifically, there is no act of compassion and help in times of distress. As far as transactions are concerned, there is no act of good faith. Without Justice and Righteousness, the prophet said that there was no hope – the light that the people longed for would not appear, and men and women could only walk in darkness. No matter how loudly they wailed, their help simply would not come.

How should we understand the conjunction “therefore” in 59:9? To do so, we need to recall its context, Isaiah 56:1-59:8, and read it several times back and forth, in order to grasp God’s expectation of a just and righteous society,

and how Israel had evolved to be the exact opposite of God’s ideal during the times of the prophets. Thus, the prophet used “therefore” emphatically. **The Israelites, who were originally called to experience a covenantal relationship with the LORD, were habitually sweeping justice and righteousness under their feet. So, like the blind they groped along the wall,** feeling their way like men without eyes, just the person who was described in Amos 5:19 (NET) - “he leaned his hand against the wall, and was bitten by a poisonous snake.” Hence, the prophet declared, “For this reason deliverance is far from us and salvation does not reach us.” (Isaiah 5:9, NET)

Isaiah

59:12-15

When the prophet stood in the sinners' place to intercede, he was no longer an observer. He highlighted the key moral issue: "We have rebelled and tried to deceive the LORD; we turned back from following our God. We stir up oppression and rebellion; we tell lies we concocted in our minds" (NET). What was the root cause of this covenant-people's degradation? The prophet lamented loudly, "We have turned our backs on our God." This people were born because of God's redemptive act; when they were estranged from God, they became a rebellious and oppressive lot.

In the Ancient Near East, the city square (NIV, NAS & NLT translated it as "street") was the place where business transactions transpired. The prophet wailed in a lament song: "Truth stumbles in the streets, and honesty has been outlawed." Israel's societal values system had completely undermined truth, justice and uprightness; "integrity" had been disregarded in the basics of transaction law. During the Old Testament times, the city gates were places where the elders would listen and resolve quarrels and disputes. But when the city gates barred those who

were “upright” from entering, then that entire city became corrupt, as expressed in the first clause of verse 15.

The similarity between the situations that are depicted here and in Romans 3:18-20 helps us to understand that the rejection of and rebellion against God was not a problem that was restricted to ancient Israel, but it was also manifested in humankind.

It is through the meta-narratives as experienced by Israel that we realise that all human beings are made by the same Creator-God. Israel was first elected by God to bless all nations, so that all people might be blessed by them and turn to God to receive redemption. However, before the dawn of salvation breaks, darkness seems to be much denser. If people are not aware of their pathetic situation, they will not realise even when the dawn of salvation has arrived, neither will they welcome his redemptive grace.

The prophet identified himself with sinners by using “we” in his intercessory prayer. During this Lent period, whose situation do we identify with and pray for as “we”?

Isaiah

59:15-17

If you were faced with a very corrupt and evil situation, what would you do? Some people might say that it is better to join the crowd. Others might be like Qu Yuan of ancient China, who felt that there was no space for him to live on when his principle and aspiration could not be worked out in the political system, although people nowadays might choose to emigrate, rather than suicide. The braver ones might want to stay on to try to seek changes. However, for some, when they finally realise that desirable change cannot take place, they might choose to exit and bow out.

Have you ever thought about how God is going to be the "God of Man"? When darkness has such a strong hold on man that even under bright sunlight the darkness lingers, what should God do? Be permissive? Judge? And what is the right way to judge? Or is there a way for God to exit? What did God really do? When we read the bible, we find v15b to be eye-opening and subversive: "The Lord watches and is displeased, for there is no justice." As a matter of fact, God stayed on and watched. Firstly, he did not assume that the dark phenomenon did not exist. Secondly, he did not simply remain

cordial with the Israelites as long as they continued to bring their offerings and kept their religious feasts. In today's passage we see that God had a big reaction, he was displeased, he was shocked, and he took matters into his own hands. This indicates to us that God was watching and was reactive to what was happening; he wanted to take action and carry out a complete overhaul.

Why do we say this was a complete overhaul? In v17: "He wears his desire for justice like body armour, and his desire to deliver is like a helmet on his head." (NET) All these happened because of God's character, aimed at the fulfilment of his purpose, to instil justice and righteousness once again on his earth.

In our reading of the Old Testament, it is of great importance to take note of God's desires, and the vision that he wants to have for his creation. Let us devote our lives for his cause. We are not going to wait for God to fulfil all our wishes before we take him as our God. Instead we are shaped to become a people of God who understand what will enrage our God, know his divine desire, and journey along with him.

Isaiah

59:18-21

Day 18

09

03

How does God act? Does he send heavenly troops to eliminate the ISIS army? Verse 18 speaks of God's way in terms of territory, "to the distant shore", and the outcome is "so people will revere Yahweh's name from the setting sun, from the rising of the sun his splendour". Isn't this what Jesus taught us in prayer? "Hallowed be Thy name, Thy Kingdom come". Now it dawns on us that when we let God do things his way, he wants the whole world to get to know him again and revere his name.

As we read on, we will eventually come to an understanding of what God's salvation means. His intention is to let justice appear again and let righteousness return to the place where it belongs, as this will be the best for humanity. Verse 21 confirms this, "the breadth of the Lord will be on them, and the Word of the Lord will continue to be among their offspring, and pass on from generation to generation. This is the even better things that God will do" (read Jer 31:31-34). Hence, if we are used to the sayings that "God is not watching" or "Where is God?", it is because we are not aware of the vision of God in these

prophetic books, for God will not let the human race continue to sit in darkness. God will let light dawn on us and bring about restoration and living. And what is amazing is that God's act will include the distant islands, which covers all the nations, and not just Jacob's offspring. Whatever is said by God will surely happen, for it is the Word of the Lord.

Have you ever thought that God has lost face in this whole issue? Those who were evil and beyond cleansing, he said he would "repay". If we thought his "repay" means to exterminate them, then we are completely wrong. In actual fact, "repay" means that God wanted to bring justice and righteousness back into their community, so that even the very evil ones could have his spirit/breath, "you will obey my statutes and carefully observe my regulation"(Ezek 36:26-27). And they would pass on these words, from generation to generation.

Isaiah

60:1-9

Isaiah 60:1 exhorts God's people in Zion to "arise", for a new day was dawning. God's people in Zion were to "shine, produce light" by reflecting God's light to others. The earth and its people were covered with darkness, doom, and hopelessness (v. 2). **The appearance of God's brilliant glory would dispel that darkness.** The nations and their kings who were in darkness would come to God's light.

Israel was to look around to observe how people were coming to Zion from every direction. In verse 4, the "sons" and "daughters" refer to both Israelites and Gentiles who would go to Jerusalem to worship the LORD. The imagery of small children being carried on the hips or in side-slings of cloth assured the hearers that God would make certain that no one would be left behind, not even the helpless children who were not yet able to walk.

Multitudes of people would also come to Zion from afar on ships. Foreigners would bring to God gifts from all over the world (vv. 5-6). As the ships approached Zion from the west of the Mediterranean Sea (vv. 7-8), their billowing sails looked like clouds in the distance,

and the movement of the vessels, pitching back and forth in the wind, looked like doves darting around the opening of the nest. These ships were bringing people to honour the LORD (v. 9). **When God establishes his kingdom, he will draw all humankind to worship and glorify his name.**

This message exhorts all believers not to let the darkness of this world snuff out the brilliance of God's light that every believer should reflect towards others who need some hope (Matt 5:14-16).

Have I been so discouraged by the "darkness" in this world that I am losing my enthusiasm to reflect God's glory to the people around me?

Seek assurance from your Heavenly Father that he has sovereignty in this world because he is the Just and Righteous God. Seek his strength to handle challenging life situations that make you lose hope each day.

Ask him to teach you to rest in him, as you trust him to reign in this world.

Let your light shine before men, that they may see your good

deeds and praise your Father in heaven (Matthew 5:16).

Isaiah

60:10-17

Day 20

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03

This passage describes how God would deal with the foreigners. In the past, God used the foreign nations as instruments of his wrath to bring judgment on his people (60:10b), but in the future, God's relationship with his people would change and he would have **compassion** on them and deal with them and the foreign nations in a completely new way.

During the invasion of Jerusalem, the foreigners came with their armies to destroy the city. However, now they would be involved in building the city and the temple with cypress wood and gold. Any nation that persisted to rebel would perish (60:12). Former enemies would humbly serve the LORD (60:14), and everyone would call Zion the "City of LORD (Yahweh)" (60:14). Israel's days of troubles and oppression would be over, for God would make his dwelling place glorious and use the nations to **meet the needs of his people**.

After the LORD's glory appeared in Zion, Israel and the foreign nations would behold his glory and **worship** him. The foreigners would come to Zion with all their gold and silver to present



them as gifts to honour the LORD and glorify his dwelling place in Zion (60:6, 9, 13). Then all people would realise that the Holy One was their **Saviour, Redeemer and Protector** (60:16).

As we look around us, many people are scorning God's type of righteousness. We often hear "you will never be successful if you don't compromise." Christianity is not looked upon favourably by many humanistic groups because Christians are viewed as morally intolerant people.

But do know that the God we worship is absolutely righteous and just. We should take God's standard as the measure of righteousness and justice. Yet do not try to be more righteous than God, even as you struggle to avoid compromise! **We glorify our Heavenly Father by reflecting his character of love and mercy, as well as righteousness and justice in our lives.**

Continue to read 1 Peter 1:14-16. We do not draw people to worship the LORD by behaving like them. We live among them but we reflect God's glory before them. God is the One who will sovereignly draw people to fear and worship Him.

Isaiah

60:18-22

Day 21

12

03

Isaiah 60:18-22 focuses on how God would transform Zion with superior materials. The conventional building materials (copper, iron, wood and stone) were contrasted with the superior materials (gold, silver, copper and iron) that would be used to build the new city of Jerusalem (vv.17-18). The walls of the old city were stones; its gates, made of wood covered with bronze (45:2). In the future, God would replace them with the best and the richest possible metals to beautify the city and his temple.

The second change involved the spiritual transformation of the nation's political principles of leadership. In the future, **"peace" would be the first set of ethos** that would guard and direct relationships among nations. There would be no need for walls to protect people because peace would reign in that future era. **"Righteousness" would be the second set of ethos** that would guide "rulers and officials" as they governed the nation. Selfishness, pride, anger, deceit, covetousness, and all sorts of evil should no longer control the hearts of humankind. **God would transform people's hearts** so that **new desires, new godly values,**

and **new motivations** would direct their thoughts and actions.

60:19-20 highlights that God would be our eternal light. At that time, the Glory of God's presence would be so bright that the sun and moon would not be needed. The concept that God himself would be "your Glory" indicates that God's people would be transformed by the presence of His Glory and they would reflect that Glory.

God is now working in believers' lives that they may produce the fruit of righteousness.

For God is working in you, giving you the desire and the power to do what pleases him (Philippians 2:13, New Living Translation).

While the Holy Spirit works within us to **transform us to be Christ-like**, we also have a part to play in the sanctification process. The Apostle Paul employed the imagery of "**putting off and putting on clothing**" in exhorting us to do our part while God is working in us (sanctification).

Continue to read Colossians 3:7-14 & Ephesians 4:22-25. What are some old ways that you need to "put off"? What are some virtues

that you need to "put on"? As the Spirit of God works in you, do your conscious part in the transformation process.

Isaiah

61:1-7

Day 22

13

03

The message in Isaiah 61 serves to encourage the praying community who were in a long-drawn battle with those who did evil. By declaring that “the LORD’s breath is on me”, the prophet identified himself as God’s servant. He carried out extraordinary acts beyond human capacity, indicating that God was at work rather than the mortal. We ask: **what then is the role of God’s servant?** As the Church, what is our collective role as the Spirit-endowed commissioned community of God? Our role is two-fold: to proclaim the **good news** and to **bring about healing**.

Who were “the afflicted”? The community in general was distressed as a consequence of prolonged servitude under oppressive authorities. “Broken spirit” signifies damage done at a deeper level to the inner person. It includes the thinking process, attitudes and values that drive decision-making. It referenced the low morale of the people who were profoundly defeatist. Amid such an entrenched and pervasive despondent outlook, astonishing news was announced. What was this good news? **Release from all forms of bondage**; redress for

victims of injustice; and comfort for those who were grieving. When a person leaves behind old ways of thinking and acting, it is akin to prisoners shaking off shackles and unseeing eyes regaining their sight. One is enlightened to perspectives and wisdom previously unknown. New forms of life emerge, new ways of living ensue. Their hope laid in a promised “day of redress” that God would execute judgment upon those who did them harm.

The imagery of reversal is compelling and inspires hope. In v2b, instead of ash – finery; In v3, instead of mourning – festive oil; instead of flickering spirit – splendid garments. People smeared ash on themselves when they were in sorrow and mourning. In contrast, they shall put on festive oil on occasions of joyous celebration when God’s time arrived. “Flickering spirit” brings to mind the description of Jesus as God’s Servant (Isa 42:3; Matt 12:20). In our passage, the irony is that Israel herself was weak and flickering. Indeed, the servants of God on earth remained vulnerable even as they unwaveringly carried out their given mission. But now in God’s eyes, they were His “**faithful oaks**” and “**glorious plantation**”.

This describes strength and resilience that resulted in abundant fruitfulness (v.3b). They were sent to be news-bearers themselves, proclaiming God’s impending and definitive restoration (v.6). Amid any storm, the message of God’s good news must prevail.

Isaiah

61:7-9

Verses 7b-9 promise rewards and restitutions, with the evaluator being none other than God. During the time of the prophet's writing, God's people were subjugated to servitude of the powers over them. Injustice and oppression were pervasive. God inspired them with hope that there would come a time when all misery would end. On the appointed day of redress, they would receive from him double blessings. The blessings would be "in your land" amidst where God's people dwell. The benefits were not just for certain privileged individuals. Rather, **the entire community would get blessed**, including strangers and migrants" (v5) who resided and worked alongside God's people.

What is the basis of God's promise? Verse 8 tells us something about God's nature: God *loves* the exercise of judgment, and *hates* robbery and oppression. "Love" and "hate" in Hebrew are action-oriented words that denote active commitment and active rejection. God resolutely involves himself in doing what is right and engages relentlessly in activities that **eradicate unjust situations**. God singled out *robbery* as something

that would not go unjudged. Those in power were committing robbery when they exploited those who were less privileged. But robbery is not confined merely to this. The emphatic “I am the LORD” hints at the possibility of robbery taking place regarding sacrifices made to God. Perhaps religious authorities were extorting excessive offerings from the laity to benefit themselves; it is still happening today. In the name of God, hypocritical religious leaders demand extravagant contributions from followers to further their personal agenda. God repudiates these doings.

In contrast to oppressive authorities, God recompensed his people with the “**right wages**”. More so, God sealed a **lasting covenant** with his people. This expression differs from making a covenant with them – the latter implies a mutual commitment from both parties. God’s covenant with his people, however, was initiated by him. This divine commitment is wholly one-sided and lasting. There is no expiry date and no need for continual renewals. The lasting nature of the covenant implies that God’s promise for the current generation held even

beyond their lifetime. Their offspring inadvertently became collateral beneficiaries of the promised abundant blessings. The expression in verse 9 parallels God’s promises to Abraham (Gen 17:7, 13, 19) that resulted in the nation of Israel being birthed. Arising from God’s covenant and promise, a glorious future lies ahead for God’s people! This vision is for us too.

Isaiah

61:10-

62:5

What a glorious spectacle these verses paint!

All the characters were decked out in finery, the people were dressed in a suit of salvation and a robe of righteousness – reminders of the promises and the works of God. The new clothes that the people of God put on signified their transformation and their new status and significance.

In reading this, we can feel the exhilaration of a wedding day with the bride and groom, one with her jewelled tiara and the other with his fine tuxedo. These scenes are bursting with excitement and anticipation, finery and pomp and splendour; why, even the earth bursts with wildflowers and the garden cascades with blossoms!

It is like the “happily ever after” finale scenes at the end of movies or plays, where all the challenges and travails faced by the characters have been overcome and melted away, and there is only celebration and happiness. This scene is indeed the “happy ending” for Jerusalem.

Here, the people sing lyrical praises of Jerusalem-Zion’s restoration, promised by Yahweh;

and that is certainly something worth celebrating! Because finally, FINALLY, the city was not rejected, not ruined, and God himself had christened her a Delight (Hephzibah) and Married (Beulah). God indeed delights in Jerusalem, and holds her in the palm of his hand, like a stunning crown or a jewelled cup. All his promises have been fulfilled and their union will be consummated.

For us today, God also calls us to himself; as a **royal priesthood**, a **holy nation**. We belong to him and he will **restore** us and remind us of our real names and identities – that we are his sons and daughters, redeemed by the precious blood of Christ. As the passage says, we are **dressed in salvation** and **robed in righteousness**, even if such royal finery seems very far from our everyday lives. During this season of Lent, let us remember that we truly belong to God.

May God remind us of our identity in him, that even in the darkest of days, we can remember who we are in him, and live and act in a way that is befitting of that.

Isaiah

62:6-12

The guards that most of us are familiar with might be the security guards that man condominiums, commercial and industrial buildings. Those acquainted with the military will know about “guard duty”, and the role of ceremonial guards.

In biblical times, the perimeters being guarded were that of the city, and the idea of city walls was familiar to all. In 62:8, Yahweh spoke of a city’s guards. These guards were not ON the wall, possibly because there were no complete walls to speak of. The current state of the city was one needing restoration; the walls were broken and needed repair. Thus, the guards were instead set OVER the wall, ironically protecting what was supposed to be the defence of the city.

These guards, possibly prophets, possibly spiritual beings, had an active role not only as protection but also as reminders. Reminders of what? Reminders of what God had promised to do.

Waiting for restoration was hard. It might seem like nothing was happening; even worse, ground was being lost as the desolate city

awaited. Yet God said that he was not passive, contrary to how things appeared. Even over a ruined city, he had agents watching, in anticipation of what was to come. God's people could take heart that Zion (and therefore, they) had been redeemed by God, had been sought out by him; just as **the city had not been forsaken**; God remembered them and called them apart for him, as his holy people.

Thanks be to God who did not forsake the city and the people that he called his own. It is hard to hold onto hope when we are in need of **restoration**, and God's promises seem so far away. May God open our eyes to those he may have set over us, even as we wait for him. We **pray** also for those whom we know, that those who do not know God may be led to do so, and that Christian brothers and sisters who may be experiencing a "dark night of the soul" find their refuge in God.

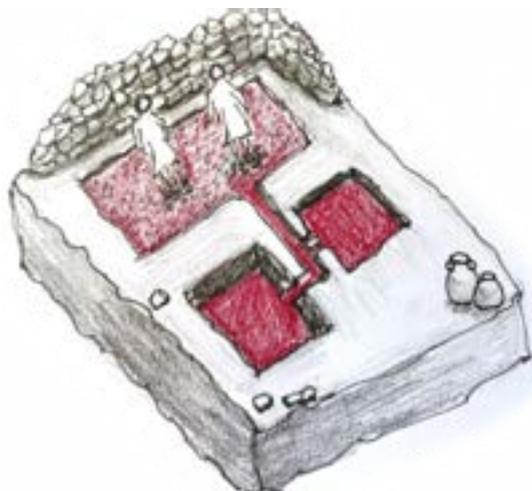
Isaiah

63:1-3

Day 26

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This passage begins with a question and presents a vision in both visual and audio forms. The audience was placed on a tower to see a warrior coming from Bozrah, the capital of Edom. Who was this, with his garments stained crimson, robed in splendour, striding forward in the greatness of his strength? The answer: "It is I, proclaiming victory, mighty to save." This was God announcing himself, the saviour bringing justice. Paralleled with the warrior in 59:15-20, both mention God's displeasure in seeing injustice. Since there was no one to help, he achieved salvation himself. We are again reminded of his armour: he put on righteousness as his breastplate, and the helmet of salvation on his head; he put on the garments of vengeance and wrapped himself in zeal as in a cloak. (59:17) Psalm 104:1 also describes "Lord my God, you are very great; you are clothed with splendour and majesty.



The ensuing questions are regarding the warrior's garments: why were they red? Why were they like those of one treading the winepress? Ancient winepresses in Israel were usually found in chalk/limestone bedrock which cut easily

and held liquids well. Grapes were pressed by being trodden underfoot on a treading floor. The juice would pass through a channel into a vat, where it would ferment. In the process of squeezing, grape juice would splatter on the clothes of the people working on it. Here, the Prophet saw the warrior's clothes like winepress workers, splashed with blood stains everywhere, and so he asked for the reasons. The warrior said, because he alone trampled on the grapes, and trampled in anger, the trampled human blood splashed onto his clothes, and so he was covered with blood stains. This also demonstrates that God, even when alone, has the power to win the battle.

Looking back at Isaiah 60-62 above, God promised to rebuild Jerusalem and save His people. Here in chapter 63, we see that God acted in anger and trampled upon his enemies. Whatever God promised would be fulfilled in his own words in faithfulness.

Isaiah

63:4-6

63: 2 raises two questions: why was this warrior dressed in red? Why were his clothes stained like a winepress? Verse 3 says that because he alone had trodden the winepress, and did so in anger, their blood splattered on his garments. The prophet further explained the causes of God's actions. Verse 4 says that "the day of vengeance" and "the year of salvation for my people" have come. God would judge the nations, "trample them down," "make them drunk," and "pour their blood down on the ground". Isaiah 59:17 also mentions that God wanted to wear the helmet of salvation on his head; and put on the garments of vengeance. God's promises are faithful. Once he declares his promises, he will execute his power at the right time, to avenge the enemies of his people, defeat the nations and save his people, to rebuild Zion, and fulfil his promises. It is his true nature that God delivers what he says, to intervene and avenge the humiliated and marginalised.

Corrine Carvalho once commented that God has absolute authority and sovereignty. The God she experienced was good, not evil, but he used violence to

attack the enemy. Whether or not you have thought about God like this – he takes care of his people so completely that his wrath is incurred; he does not stand by but intervenes and takes action. Verse 5b emphasises that God used his “own arm for my salvation”, with “no help” and “no support” and in verse 3, “alone”, “no one with all the people” are mentioned. Therefore, “fury, anger, trample” of verses 3, 5 and 6 are all expressions of God who implemented his judgment alone! If we revisit the reflections of Days 15 and 16, let us be reminded that **God had taken vengeance on these people who had forsaken the righteous and righteousness.** Regardless of how long we have believed in God, perhaps we have never thought of God in such a magnitude! No wonder Paul said what he said in Romans 8: 31-39!

Isaiah

63:7-14

The people of God who had been living under foreign oppression might have wondered, whatever happened to the glorious promises of restoration? Recounting the past, however, could be both encouraging and painful for Israel. It could be a rallying cry and protest to urge God to act as mightily as in the days of Exodus: "God, if you had saved us before, then surely you can do it again." At the same time, it was a confession of their past rebelliousness: "God, we know why you have turned away from us; it was our sinfulness, wasn't it?" The Exodus event was a definitive moment of God's deliverance of his people. Moses was divinely empowered to lead the people across the sea. It was a declaration by God that they belonged to him. He guided them and his Spirit was with them. It was the event that gave hope whenever divine deliverance was needed. If only God would show His compassion and mercy once again.

But it was also in the story of Exodus (and Numbers) that we saw the people rebelling against God. They grumbled about their circumstances. They worshipped idols. They even yearned to return

to Egypt. What is shocking was that the Prophet said this “grieved his Holy Spirit”. The Almighty God can be angry. He can be annoyed and frustrated. But now we know he can even be “hurt” or “grieved”. Here is a being unlike any other mortal being; his Spirit is a holy one. Yet, in making himself so intimately linked to his people, he became vulnerable to the point of being hurt by rejection.

What would God and the people remember? (A theme repeated in 64:5,9) When a relationship is broken, and memories are triggered to move the relationship forward, will it be the good times or the bad that would decide the fate of this relationship? Will God be motivated to repeat his salvation, or be hurt again by the people’s unfaithfulness? In the end, both memories are needed for the relationship to mature. We learn that salvation is needed beyond our external circumstances. **We need a Saviour who will make us a new creation, ever faithful to God.** And in remembering Exodus, we know **all things are possible with God.**

Isaiah

63:15-19

For the next three days till the end of chapter 64, we shall reflect on Isaiah's prayer to God. In his prayer, Isaiah began his petition boldly, even to the brink of goading God. (See similar rhetoric from Moses in Exodus 32:12.) It was as if God had given up on this people, and Isaiah was trying to provoke God into action once again. Verse 15: "Where are your zeal and your might? Your tenderness and compassion to us? Are they restrained?" Isaiah deliberately contrasted God's heavenly position with his absence from his people. Surely God was not too far off or holding back his feelings from us, right? The truth is, the fact of God's distancing from his people was real. But Isaiah might have hoped to incite God into responding to his people's plight.

Then Isaiah rubbed it in even deeper by questioning: Why, Lord, do you make us wander from your ways and harden our hearts so we do not revere you? (v.17) This accusation was unprecedented audacity, even compared to Ps. 107:40 or Exo. 7:3, since the verb that was used implied divine responsibility. Even if God merely permitted, rather than caused, Israel's sins, it would be impudent

to say God was responsible. Boldly or foolhardily, Isaiah went all out in drawing God's attention.

Then he used mockery. We are your servants. We belong to you. These are your holy places. But now, others rule over us. They desecrate your sanctuary. Was Isaiah shaming God about his losses? Then he asked God to "return", a word often associated with repentance. Instead of getting the people to repent, he was asking God to "repent"! Was God going to regret losing his possessions to others who disrespected him?

There is no excuse for Isaiah's audacious language. He was daring God to make his move. However, he said all these within a mindset of similarly unprecedented intimacy with God. He said, "**You, Lord, are our Father**" (v.16). God as the father of his people was a highly unusual concept in the Old Testament. Yet, at this point, Isaiah was professing God's fatherhood for begetting this people. He whined as a child to a father who had punished him. **He was demanding a show of love.** Thankfully, through Jesus Christ, God reciprocated and acknowledged himself to be the Father of his people.

Isaiah

64:1-7

If God had responded to Isaiah's petition, what would it be like? In Isaiah's imagination, the heavens would be torn apart to allow for God's intervention in this world. And it would shake up the world order. And if God did act, it would not go unnoticed. The mountains symbolised the earthly authorities, who would tremble in God's presence. This was true whether in the case of Pharaoh during the Exodus, or the Babylonians when Cyrus conquered them. Isaiah was referring to a category of acts that belonged solely to God alone. Whether it was the parting of the seas, or the miraculous survival of the Jewish remnants, these were all unprecedented and beyond human thoughts. God responded to those who remembered him, and in those divine acts, the world acknowledged, "this must be God." And so **Isaiah prayed and pleaded for God to act once again**, to set the world ablaze with **his stamp of authority and presence**.

But if there was one lingering doubt in Isaiah's request, it would be the problem of sin. Sin caused God to hide himself from his people. God withdrew himself

from such detestable people. Sin defiled the people, as in the Levitical understanding of uncleanness. Sin brought weakness and death to the community. We can imagine them withering like a plant that had lost its source of life, and would eventually be blown away without a trace. The people lost their identity without God. And because God evaded and ignored them, they either could not cry out to him anymore or cried in vain.

In the New Testament, the heavens tore open at the baptism of Jesus (Mark 1:10). On the Day of Pentecost, the Holy Spirit descended like tongues of flames and sounded like a violent wind from heaven (Acts 2:2-3). Just as imagined by Isaiah in 64:1, God acted and manifested his presence upon the earth. As Paul quoted in 1 Corinthians 2:9, such an act of divine salvation could only come from God. God is personally saving us from sin. The Holy Spirit is our counselor and defense against sin. We are thankful for the prayer of Isaiah, and remember and acknowledge God himself.

Isaiah

64:8-12

In the final segment of Isaiah's prayer, he concluded by summing up the varied thoughts of this petition to God. God was the Father of the people. He was their creator just like the potter to a lump of clay. Isaiah beseeched him not to give up, but instead to mould them once again. If he had turned away before because of their sins, then it was time to "turn back" to look at them. And in remembrance, he asked to forget the bad times of betrayal and infidelity, and to focus on the relationship. "We are all your people". There can be a time of anger but let not this anger be "forever". There were indeed sinners among them, particularly the leaders. But eventually, the entire community was "all" God's people.

And if only God would just look at them, either because of Isaiah's bold provocations or heart-rending appeals, God would be moved by their state of utter destruction. Isaiah talked about the cities, and then zoomed in on Jerusalem. He narrowed the focus to the temple, and lastly to the treasures within. These were no mere places or buildings or things, but representations of a shared history between God and his people.

He led them to these cities through Joshua as their promised land. After the nation was formed, Jerusalem became the city of David. Upon the completion of the Temple, the people had a house of prayer. And within the Temple was the Ark of the Covenant.

If God would just look at them now, and see all those precious memories in destruction, could he still “restrain” himself?

Could he “remain still”? Isaiah asked these questions knowingly. Psalm 103: 7 He made known his ways to Moses, his deeds to the people of Israel: 8 The Lord is compassionate and gracious, slow to anger, abounding in love. 9 He will not always accuse, nor will he harbour his anger forever; 10 he does not treat us as our sins deserve or repay us according to our iniquities. These poetic words were based on God’s personal revelation to Moses in **Exodus 34:6-7**. Isaiah trusted that God would forgive and restore them. That is just who he is.

Isaiah

65:1-2

The people prayed (63:7-64:12) and God then began his response to their prayer. The way he did it was by first revealing how life had been for him as their God. He had made himself available to them all day long, only to be ignored perpetually. To them he called out “Here I am, here I am (v.1)”, which were words previously used by Abraham in response to himself (Gen 22:1), by Samuel in response to Eli (1 Sam 3:4) and by Isaiah again in response to himself (Isa 6:8). In other words, a phrase previously only found on the lips of servants in the OT was here uttered by God to his supposed servants.

“Spreading out my hand (v.2)” presses further the point. This expression is regularly used in the OT to refer to the posture that servants adopted before their kings or that which the people adopted when they went before God. Yet **it was God who appeared herein in a servant’s posture in reaching out to his people**, waiting to be called upon. God was willing to turn things totally upside down, however, the relationship remained estranged.

The life God had in waiting for Israel allows us to see that our God is a God who suffered because

of his people: his benevolence was greeted daily with rejection. It is of no surprise that both parties in this God and man relationship had to suffer, since the very element needed to keep it normal and healthy – godliness – was often in short supply as far as the human counterpart was concerned. The picture of God continually waiting in expectation also suggests that **his future lay somewhat in the hands of the ones whom he was waiting to get a response from.** This in turn alerts us against the unqualified usage of words such as unchangeable, unshakable and unstoppable. Not that these words are incorrect as descriptions of God, but Isaiah badly wanted us to be aware that God is one who readily interacts with us. And even though it might be hard to imagine, our acts and thoughts which might be regarded as worthless or go unnoticed by a world of busy people do catch the attention of God, even having an effect on him.

Isaiah

65:3-7

The people in their prayer acknowledged that they had been a society of rebels and wondered if God would continue to punish them because of it (63:7-64:12). Having told the people how he was constantly being rejected by them (65:1-2), God answered their query with a fearsome “yes”. Punishment had to be meted out not because God had failed to catch his people’s attention, but for the idolatrous and syncretic worship practices that abounded before and after the exile to Babylon. We call this group of worshippers ‘the permissive’. These practices included sacrificing to celestial deities on bricks (cf. Zep 1:5), a ritual probably picked up from the Babylonians. Israelites were also seen to have slept at their ancestors’ tomb, in the hope that their dreams would afford them guidance. So, much as the people’s prayer (63:7-64:12) suggested that God was not being forgotten, it was apparent that God was also not readily remembered when the people wanted to seek improvements and results in daily living. Different forms and degrees of syncretism had plagued God’s people in the OT era, and one wonders how much of its spell is still at work (in us) today?

For the Israelites, their misdeeds had effected such a wrath in God that Isaiah pictured “smoke” in his nostrils and “a fire that burns all the day” (see 2 Sam 22:9; Ps 18:8 for usage of similar OT metaphor). Divine punishment would be the result for causing such grievousness, both with theirs and their fathers’ iniquities (v.7). Nothing on “generational curses” should be deduced from the verse (cf. Exo 34:7; Jer 32:18-19); however, we may reflect on two other aspects. First, the post-exilic community transgressed in part because of the wrongs that had been introduced and made readily available by their ancestors. This piece of Israel’s history should give us pause and make us ask ourselves: what sort of lives should we be leading? What legacy do we want to leave for our children and grandchildren (not to mention our spiritual children), that they may be people who bless God and be blessed by God? Second, though it will be painful to the core (v.6c & 7c), God getting angry and punishing wrongs is in fact good news and true hope. We, at best, have the longing for purity and godliness, but it is God who is loving, just and able, who alone can work the needed transformation in us.

Isaiah

65:8-12

The answer to the prayer (63:7-64:12) continues with much needed clarifications. Firstly, judgement (vv.6-7) would not mean the wiping out of the community. The “cluster” with “a blessing in it” (v.8) referred to the purist who had remained faithful to pure worship of Yahweh amidst a climate of syncretism and idolatry practiced by the permissive, and who would be spared. The purist was not to be confused with the “remnants” who might not have been faithful to Yahweh but were nonetheless preserved simply because of God’s mercy. The purist, to reiterate, was faithful and committed.

Secondly, the faith of the purist was not in vain as the group would inherit blessings. The purist alone was herein called “my servants” and “my people”. They would dwell in Sharon and the Valley of Achor, which was in fact the entire land since these two areas were representative of the whole of the western and eastern parts of Israel respectively.

Thirdly, the purist would see justice being brought about. Back then, the permissive was the larger and more powerful group, who had wanted to oust the powerless purist

from their homeland. These infidels worshipped foreign deities such as Fortune and Destiny. Their infidelity had reached such an extent that they had forgotten about God's holy mountain (v.11), meaning that they had given up worshipping in the temple. Over time, the permissive came to see themselves as spiritual people who had the upper hand in civic struggles. But the prophet's oracle declared that they who had laid (variously rendered as "set" or "spread" in different English versions) the table for Fortune would soon bow down to the slaughter; they who went to Destiny to learn of their future were destined to the sword.

All of the above were prophesied, not reported. In other words, there was still time for the people back then to heed the prophet's warning and to act wisely. In today's context, the words of the prophets are likewise sending an urgent call for all of us to search our hearts and our acts and to repent duly before God acts – either in mercy or in judgment.

Isaiah

65:13-25

Day 35

29

03

Today we read the final portion of God's answer to the prayer made in 63:7-64:12, where the permissive continued to hear God's words to them. Their fate, should they remain recalcitrant, would turn out really bad. They would be hungry, thirsty, put to shame and wail for the breaking of spirit (vv.13-14). The very last thing that would happen to them was to be put to death because of their "conviction" (v.15). This list of negatives, when compared and contrasted with the blessings that would befall the purist, served as an urgent call issued to the permissive to quit syncretism.

While the choices of some of these people had yet to be known, something good had happened in the meantime. Verse 16b declares that God had in his mercy exercised forgetfulness, in that the former troubles were hidden from his eyes. However, God is not one who simply dumps the past and moves on in life. He is God the Creator, who creates a new heaven and new earth (v.17, ESV). Translations such as ESV and Chinese Union Version render the word "create" into a simple present tense in order to convey a sense of immediateness

expressed in the Hebrew text. In other words, new heaven and new earth in this passage refer neither to a new planetary system in the end times nor that God will redo what he did in Genesis 1; rather, new heaven and new earth refer to the transformation of the lives of these people who prayed the prayer.

The subsequent verses support such a reading. New heaven and new earth were replaced by Jerusalem in verse 18, referring to a place characterised by joy, with a people characterised by gladness. In it, no one would be deprived from living a full life; even a sinner would live to a hundred years old, albeit still dying the death of a sinner. Animals in this transformed city would likewise enjoy safety, expressed with a hyperbole (v.25).

In this portion of God's answer to the prayer, **we see a long suffering God**, whose mercy and grace are unstoppable. Ignored and insulted by the permissive, his response was to forgive should they repent. In any case, he was giving all of them a second chance. God, in allowing both the faithful and the sinner to live long lives, was extending grace – grace that is good yet scary. What sort of death will we

die in time to come? For now, let us learn to cling to the God who as a master being ignored, chose to respond readily to the voices of the servants (v.24).

Isaiah

66:1-6

Day 36

30

03

In the debate between the purist and the permissive, the issue at hand was worship. Having given the permissive warnings and an invitation to repent (65:8-25), God then addressed the purist. Was the purist right in being insistent about the forms of worship? Or was the permissive right in blending in other pagan styles from the surrounding cultures? This debate was an inevitable struggle for God's people who had been exposed to the Babylonian world while in exile, and who later returned to a land occupied by foreign immigrants. Perhaps God could permissively be worshipped in other forms?

To this debate, God reminded his people that he was the God of Creation. The creator of the heavens and the earth was enthroned and "rested" in his creation. It is ludicrous to think he can be contained within a house of worship. But the purpose of this revelation was not to imply that worship was meaningless and therefore anything was permissible. On the contrary, it was to remind his people that **worship was only meaningful based on God's terms**. It was never about the splendour of the Temple or the value of the

sacrifices. God's acceptance of the worship was based on contrite hearts and **reverence of his word**. It was not the purity of the forms of worship that mattered, but that the purity reflected obedience and fear of God.

So there would be a judgement on the still unrepentant permissive who ostracised the purist from the worshipping community. The permissive reflected a disregard of God's word and will. They cared only about their own ways of life, even in their ways of worship. They lived a wonton life of violence, while offering unclean sacrifices. They thought they had won the battle in ousting the purists, but they had lost the war on God's sovereignty. God would put them to shame, even treating them like his enemies.

Let us be reminded about the **heart of worship. It is all about God**. God's critique of the permissive reveals what is not worship: For when I called, no one answered, when I spoke, no one listened. They did evil in my sight and chose what displeases me. (v.4) Worship is answering God's call and listening to his word. Worship is living a righteous life and choosing what is pleasing to God.

Isaiah

66:7-17

Day 37

31

03

In verse 17, the prophet rehashed the sins of the permissive (first mentioned in 65:3-5). They would be judged by God with fury. Notice that judgement and restoration often go hand-in-hand. Whenever promises of restoration were declared, they always came alongside the purging of evil. The reason was because God acted against oppression and injustice. In this particular case, the purists had been treated unfairly by the permissive. (See 66:5, "Your own people who hate you, and exclude you because of my name.") This is the God of Creation; he would vindicate and make right the wrongs against his servants.

What about restoration? Zion (Jerusalem) would once again become a place teeming with life. It would be a vibrant city and the wealth of nations would flood into the land. It would be alive! This is perhaps why the restoration was expressed with metaphors of childbirth and child-rearing. Those were the days of high infant mortality. The growth process from baby to maturity was fraught with risks and unpredictability. Yet, God promised a miraculous transformation. The delivery would

be smooth and painless (without the anaesthesia, epidural!). The people who were born would be well fed. And nothing is more comforting than a healthy growing child. It would be hard to imagine that Jerusalem, after centuries of destitute, could ever become a place attracting and sustaining lives, but that was precisely the marvel factor of the promise. It looked impossible then, but when it was fulfilled, “the hand of the Lord would be made known.” (v.14)

Today, our **hope** lies not on the restoration of Jerusalem, but **in acknowledging the God who brings life**. He conquers those who fight against his good will. And to those who are faithful to him, he makes them flourish. In reflection, are we on the side that celebrates life? As a people, are we a blessing to those who come into our lives? As we aim to achieve happiness, prosperity and progress for our nation, let us be mindful of justice and equality for all. And when the world looks at us, our existence and growth will bring rejoicing and comfort to them.

Maundy Thursday

Luke

23:44-56

Day 38

01

04

⁴⁴ It was now about noon, and dark-ness came over the whole land until three in the afternoon, ⁴⁵ because the sun's light failed. The temple curtain was torn in two. ⁴⁶ Then Jesus, calling out with a loud voice, said, "Father, into your hands I commit my spirit!" And after he said this he breathed his last.

⁴⁷ Now when the centurion saw what had happened, he praised God and said, "Certainly this man was innocent!" ⁴⁸ And all the crowds that had assembled for this spectacle, when they saw what had taken place, returned home beating their breasts. ⁴⁹ And all those who knew Jesus stood at a distance, and the women who had followed him from Galilee saw these things.

⁵⁰ Now there was a man named Joseph who was a member of the council, a good and righteous man. ⁵¹ (He had not consented to their plan and action.) He was from the Judean town of Arimathea, and was looking forward to the kingdom of God. ⁵² He went to Pilate and asked for the body of Jesus. ⁵³ Then he took it down, wrapped it in a linen cloth, and placed it in a tomb cut out of the rock, where no one had yet been buried. ⁵⁴ It was the day of preparation and the Sabbath was beginning. ⁵⁵ The women who had accompanied Jesus from Galilee followed, and they saw the tomb and how his body was laid in it. ⁵⁶ Then they returned and prepared aromatic spices and perfumes.

On the Sabbath they rested according to the commandment.



Special article on Maundy Thursday

In the course of our church's observation of the season of Lent, we will typically hold our passion week worship with Holy Communion on Thursday, while some churches will commemorate the suffering of our Lord on Friday.

Why did we decide on Thursday? It is because Jesus and his disciples had the last supper on a Thursday night, and before supper, Jesus laid aside his garments, girded a towel around his waist, and began to wash each of his disciples' feet, and only thereafter did he partake the supper with them. There are two key points underlying our selection of Thursday, first, Jesus washed his disciples' feet (this was only recorded in the Gospel of John), and second, while at

the table, Jesus transformed the disciples' customary practices at the Passover Seder dinner, shifting the focus of the celebration from God's deliverance of the Israelites from the hands of the Egyptians, to the body and blood of Jesus, and his establishing of a new covenant with them. (These were recorded in the Gospels of Matthew, Mark and Luke, each with its own emphasis).

The disciples were shocked by Jesus' washing of their feet, because even Jews with servants would not arrange for their servants to wash the masters' feet, as such lowly tasks should only be performed by foreign workers. Yet Jesus, as their Rabbi, asked that the disciples too, should wash each other's feet. With a simple

task of feet washing, Jesus did an about-turn in the disciples' thinking, particularly as the disciples were incessantly focused on and persistently questioning who should be on Jesus' right- and left-hand after he gained power. Instead, Jesus commanded that they should follow his example, as doing so would bring about a meaningful impact on church life thereafter. Because when one was willing to humble himself to wash his brothers' feet, it would gradually alter the 'who is the greatest' mindset. This notion by Jesus laid down the foundation/ cornerstone for the church to obey and forgive one another, and to bear each other's burden. If one were able to wash another's feet, then s/ he would also be able to forgive and

bear each other's burden. When the church carries out acts for God in the future, they will be able to work with one spirit and mind even on more difficult undertakings, because Jesus' command of 'you also should wash one another's feet' broke down social barriers and personal agenda.

At the table, Jesus spoke about 'this is my body given for you,' 'this cup is the new covenant in my blood, which is poured out for you' (Luke 22: 19-20), providing an extremely rich meaning and this is how we would like to enrich your understanding through the Holy Communion over the years.

Good Friday

Isaiah

66:18-21

Day 39

02

/

04

At the conclusion of Isaiah, we see once again the vision of the restoration of God's people. This final restoration shall begin with the gathering of the exilic community that had been dispersed among the nations. As if summoned by an edict from above, foreigners everywhere would bring God's people back to Jerusalem "as an offering". The phrasing of verse 20 paints a picture of nations in the region, from Europe to North Africa to Middle East, paying a tribute to the divine King. And the news went viral. When the nations witnessed for themselves how God's people were being restored, they would acknowledge his sovereignty. These foreigners would become "missionaries" for God when they returned to their own countries to proclaim what they saw. And this is a crucial point about God's glory. God's glory is often imagined as awesome grandeur or heavenly sights. But very often, God's glory is biblically illustrated in his faithfulness to his people. God's greatness lies in his enduring commitment to bring them back despite their faithlessness. He delivers them from the hopeless circumstances of their own doing. And when the world realises this, they will marvel at the God who

accomplishes such a feat.

This is the proper framework to understand God's salvation for all mankind. The good news of God is meant for all nations and all tongues. But it does not mean that they can each find God in their own way. They must first begin by recognising what God will accomplish with his people in Jerusalem. And because God's glory is fully manifested in the restoration of his people, bringing them back from all parts of the world, all nations can believe that he is indeed God of all nations. And because he is faithful to his ancient promises, he is therefore worthy of all praise and faith from people to come. The story of God and Israel becomes the "sign", like a beacon to the world. This is how God reveals himself, and this is how we know the one true God. This is also evangelism in a nutshell. We speak of this story of God and invite people to respond to him.

Good Friday reminds us it is God who personally restores us back to him. The love of God as expressed through the cross vividly shows us that the only way to reconcile with God is through the beloved Son of God. Let us who are believers from

all over the world, as prophesied by Isaiah, commit ourselves as living sacrifices to God. Witness about Christ in our daily lives. Proclaim the Gospel.

Holy Saturday

Isaiah

66:22-24

Day 40

03

04

There are two final imageries in the restoration of God's people: a temple of worshippers and a graveyard of dead bodies. It is a reminder of Deuteronomy 30:15-20, that the choice of life and death is always before God's people. Moses said, "19 This day I call the heavens and the earth as witnesses against you that I have set before you life and death, blessings and curses" (Deut 30:19). Even in the new heaven and new earth, it is so. Out of those who returned to Jerusalem, God would restore the temple system. And there shall be unending generations of worshippers, Sabbath after Sabbath, New Moon after New Moon. The deliverance of God's people was for worship (See Ex 7:16). And as long as they stayed faithful in their prayers, the creator of the heavens and the earth would bring forth life. But the other imagery is a constant reminder of the result of faithlessness. In death, there is only cremation or burial. There can be no new life without God.

As a conclusion to Isaiah, these everyday life imageries may pale in comparison to the heavenly visions in other parts of Scripture. Yet, it is a timely reminder of how **our daily living is just as precious**

as the life to come. Every Sunday is a gift put in place by God to worship him. Every celebration, whether Christmas or Easter, is a sign of the continuation of God's grace till this day. Every day is a personal choice between living well and dying slowly. We learn to treasure these moments lest we shall miss them, like the ancient Jews living in exile. Psalm 6:5 says, "Among the dead no one proclaims your name. Who praises you from the grave?"

Isaiah 56-66 is an intimate conversation between God and his people about hope. They hope for a day of a full reconciled relationship. They hope to live at peace for generations. In Jesus Christ, this hope is fulfilled. Once, we were "without hope and without God in the world. 13 But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near by the blood of Christ. 14 For he himself is our peace. (Ephesians 2:12-14)



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