

## **Sermon – Pentecost 23**

### **Isaiah 65.17-25**

In the name of the Father, the Son and the Holy Spirit, Amen.

Today, on our second last Sunday in this liturgical year, we continue with our end time readings, leading into next week and the festival of Christ the King, which we will of course celebrate at Christ Church, Little River with confirmations and the blessing of Leon being licenced to our parish as a Lay Minister. I'm sure that this will be a very happy occasion and we will again welcome +Philip Huggins in joining us.

Last week we looked at the concept of resurrection, through the lens of the Gospel story of Jesus' response, to the Sadducees, about the widow of seven husbands. Today, we will delve into the prophetic sayings of Isaiah and see an Old Testament take on the "new heavens and a new earth". There's something so beautiful and compelling about our reading from Isaiah today. Its beautiful poetry has inspired artwork and music across the ages including The Peaceable Kingdom series by Edward Hicks a 19<sup>th</sup> century American painter and Quaker minister. And I put one of the 61 paintings of this series on the front cover of our bulletin. Many of you will probably have seen them before and recall the style – the wolf and the lamb, the lion and the ox, and all the happy healthy children.

So, what's this reading about? Like most of scripture it can be interpreted in layers. It's taken from the 2<sup>nd</sup> last chapter of Isaiah following the return of the Israelites from exile in Babylon and the rebuilding of the Temple. At a literal level, the reading could be about the rebuilding of the new Jerusalem following this return from exile and all the hopes that would be enshrined in this endeavour. A people who not only return to their home town, but also return to worshipping their God in the Temple, with a focus on Jerusalem as the religious centre for the people of Israel.

But the poetry of the writing also fires the imagination and perhaps calls for a deeper, more metaphorical interpretation. Starting with the first verse:

For I am about to create new heavens and a new earth;  
the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind.

These words for me recall the creation story of Genesis where God speaks into being the world as we know it, day time, night time, the earth, the seas, the heavens. Is the prophet suggesting a cosmic meaning in this poetry, especially when he says “the former things shall not be remembered or come to mind”? The pain, the challenges, the high lights and the low lights, they won’t be part of the new heavens and earth. Perhaps a bit like last week when Jesus says that children of the resurrection neither marry nor are given in marriage.

And the reading is filled with utopian images. In this picture infant and childhood disease, so prevalent in the ancient world, are gone. Someone who reaches a 100th birthday is considered young. Human endeavour is successful and fertility problems disappear. The passage ends with echoes from Isaiah 11:6-9, in the first part of Isaiah where the prophet is predicting the fall of Jerusalem and the exile to Babylon. Wolves stop eating lambs and the lion’s diet of straw represents its domestication. Both passages locate this picture of blessings on God’s “holy mountain” a metaphor used for both worship and revelation.

The poem also depicts the new heavens and earth as a time of joy and rejoicing. The prophet goes on to say in verse 18:

But be glad and rejoice for ever in what I am creating;  
for I am about to create Jerusalem as a joy, and its people as a delight.  
I will rejoice in Jerusalem, and delight in my people;  
no more shall the sound of weeping be heard in it, or the cry of distress.

Perhaps it's too easy to think of the images described in this passage as ancient problems. In this age of advanced medicine, we view pregnancy as a happy time, and do not prepare mothers for the possibility of their own death in childbirth. In the same way, we do not worry about being attacked by lions when we step out of our back doors. Perhaps, as a result, when we go to church, we don't expect the world to change into a paradise.

But the poem points to the different reality behind worship, and creates a picture of what God's kingdom looks like. God creates a new reality; the form of the verb used in verse 17 suggests creation is God's on-going activity. It's not just about the beginning of the world or the end. The ideal world can be created "new" every day. God's creative work turns the world we live in into a holy space, God's territory. Divine blessings radiate out into the city and the countryside. Every day, God recreates this cosmos: a world of harmony and joy. It's a message of hope in a world that is as grim today as it was 3000 years ago.

The picture in Isaiah is a picture of communal harmony. And that community is defined in the broadest of terms: it includes even the things that can harm us. And the blessings are not demonstrated by the wealth of the elite: there is no prosperous king in this picture. God's blessings are seen when the poorest and most at risk among us live to a ripe old age.

Our passage today invites us to consider how our experience of God's holiness changes the world for us. We may not feel a great need to domesticate lions, but what would the world look like if children did not die from disease or violence, if all people had access to the best education and medical care, and if everyone earned a liveable wage so that their work was not in vain. What if everyone could have as many children as they wanted, knowing they could provide for them without anxiety? What if our young people could find the affordable housing they needed to bring up

their new families. Isaiah tells us that this is the world that worship should invite us to imagine.

So what do we do with this reading? How do we apply it to ourselves both personally and as a parish? As we look into the coming year, I wonder what new creation God has in store for us? Will our new Mission Action Plan reflect a striving towards that new creation? A place filled with young children, with gainfully employed adults, and contented elders taking that vital role of gifting us with their wisdom and experience? Are we ready to worship at our holy mountain, our God who will answer us when we call and who will hear us when we speak?

Let us pray.

Loving Creator God,

We give you thanks for this beautiful place in which we live.

We give you thanks for each new day and the opportunity we have to live in peace and harmony with all of your creation.

Stir up in us a longing for your kingdom so that all our actions are shaped by you, that we can be part of your ongoing work of creation.

In Jesus' name we pray, Amen.