

Sunday Evening 10th November 2013. Kenneth Gray Isaiah 51:1-8, "The only thing that lasts"

This passage from Isaiah addresses the dual realities confronting the people of God - the reality of death and destruction and the assurance of God's promised unfailing love.

Kenneth observed that many modern churches do not have a war memorial because there have been no world-wide conflicts since they have been built. On this Remembrance Sunday it is easy to get sucked into the process of 'looking back'. Many people in the UK still seem to cling to the view, expressed so memorably by Winston Churchill, that our 'finest hour' was in 1940 and it's been downhill ever since. Kenneth during his study leave noted that some of the big churches he visited were not as big as they used to be and there is a sense, across the land, that we are in a period of decline and our best days are behind us.

Prophets such as Isaiah and Jeremiah were prophesying periods of destruction, decay and judgment. God had turned his face away from his people because of their disobedience and sinfulness. Isaiah 51 talks of destruction but also offers hope. It may well be that we are in similar times or it may well be that we are about to see God do great things in our land.

God's message through Isaiah is, firstly, that the people should "*look to the rock from which you were cut and to the quarry from which you were hewn*" - look to Himself. He is the Rock of their salvation. They must remember whose they are and whom they serve.

The war memorial in our own building here records the youthfulness of some who died in the Great War and reveals the ordinariness of the men who went to war - not great generals and strategists but, for example, a postman and a golfer. It reminds us of the core of courage that has always resided in the heart of our church throughout its history and inspires us to live up to the Covenanting tradition of which we are heirs. The Church is stronger in the West of Scotland than in the East probably because of that very Covenanting tradition and we still strive to worship God in spirit and in truth.

Secondly, God gives his promise to his people in the midst of their affliction: "*he will make her deserts like Eden, her wastelands like the garden of the Lord.*" The picture is one of restoration of the land to a condition even better than it was before - a restoration that will never fade or decay.

This reminded Kenneth of Ypres which found itself in the frontline during the 1914-18 conflict. It was so bombarded that it was razed in 1919 and the Belgian authorities then rejected suggestions that the site should remain flattened as a memorial to hundreds of thousands of soldiers who had been killed, 100 thousand of whose bodies had never been found and identified.

Instead they rebuilt Ypres and created the Menin Gate Memorial to the Missing dedicated to the British and Commonwealth soldiers who were killed in the Ypres Salient and whose graves are unknown. Following the opening in 1927, the citizens of Ypres expressed their gratitude towards those who had given their lives for Belgium's freedom. Every evening at 8pm, buglers from the local fire brigade close the road which passes under the memorial and sound the "Last Post" - a ceremony that has been carried on uninterrupted since 2 July 1928. In earlier years this ceremony was attended by relatively small numbers of people but since the 1980s numbers have increased until there are now some 2,000 people present every evening.

A similar trend of remembrance is evident nowadays in the UK. Tomorrow, the 11th hour of the 11th day of the 11th month will see more people than ever before pause for 2 minutes to reflect and to honour the dead of WW1 and WW2 and subsequent conflicts.

Isaiah tells the people : "Lift up your eyes to the heavens, look at the earth beneath; the heavens will vanish like smoke, the earth will wear out like a garment and its inhabitants die like flies." This is what will happen when God comes to judge the disobedient and faithless.

We must recommit to the mission of the church to make known God's salvation through Jesus Christ so that people will be saved for eternity. Our real work is not about this world. There are churches in the Philippines which will have been planning evangelistic outreach projects for Advent whose congregations and buildings have now been destroyed by the typhoon. Their opportunity to tell people about Jesus has been snatched away.

The challenge for us is to be ready - as individuals and as a congregation - to give an account of this salvation whenever we get an opportunity. Nothing lasts forever - except God's salvation. Britain is unique in Europe in that its borders are fixed by water. Many other European countries have seen their borders shift over the decades, their territories growing or shrinking in line with military or political changes. Isaiah's message is that man-made things wear out but God-made things are everlasting.

'The Remnant' is often alluded to in the Old Testament. This is the small number of faithful believers who hold firm in their faith despite the blandishments or persecutions of the world around them. Isaiah and Jeremiah were prophesying to such a remnant who held firm to the hope for the future as promised by the Lord and who believed unswervingly that God was God.

Isaiah speaks encouragement to the remnant: ""Hear me, you who know what is right, you people who have taken my instruction to heart: do not fear the reproach of mere mortals or be terrified by their insults. For the moth will eat them up like a garment; the worm will devour them like wool. But my righteousness will last for ever, my salvation through all generations.""

This is also an encouragement for us. We should never be afraid of the reproaches of men. We must stand firm and hold to the truth of the Gospel even when those around us are growing scared or hopeless. If Isaiah had succumbed to human fear and responded to the reproaches of men he would never have passed down to us these wonderful words of the glorious grace of God for us to read and be heartened by 2,600 years later.

Let us therefore stand firm not just for the present but for future generations. On Remembrance Sunday, as we think of servicemen who died, we ask what they were fighting for. They were fighting to preserve something they believed in - the freedom to live. One can only wonder what they would think of society today.

As Christians we must ask ourselves where is our energy and our interest invested - in the transient or in the eternal?