

Sermon: The best for free

There's a story of a king who had a strange dream and summoned his wise men to interpret it for him. He told them about his dream:

"Last night I dreamt that all of my teeth fell out. I am afraid that something dreadful is going to happen to me and my kingdom." He pointed to his longest serving wise man, "You! Tell me what it means."

The wise man pondered it for a while and then told the king, "Oh your Highness. This dream has a terrible meaning. It means that all your relatives will die – your wife, your brothers and sisters, and you will be left alone."

The king was furious at what the man said – "Off with his head! How dare he speak against me like that. You are no wise man – you are a fraud." – and the guards grabbed with wise man and dragged him away.

The remaining wise men looked at each other nervously. After the king had calmed down he pointed to his next most senior wise man, "You! You tell me the meaning of my dream, and be careful not to insult your king while you do it."

The wise man took a deep breath, and bowed to the king.

"You are very fortunate, my king. Your dream has in it the promise of much happiness. You will reign over your people for many, many years. You will enjoy good health and a long, long life, in fact you will outlive your brothers and sisters, and even your beloved wife, who you will comfort in her last hours".

The king pondered this and smiled. "You are a wise man indeed! You are loyal to your king, and an insightful interpreter of dreams. You shall be rewarded with one hundred pieces of gold."

The king dismissed the wise men, and as they left the throne room one of the others asked the one who had spoken second "What happened? You told him the same thing that the unfortunate first fellow did..."

"True" said the wiser man, "but there are different ways of telling the truth".

There are different ways of telling the truth. And Jesus wants us to tell the truth – he said "Let your yes be yes and your no be no" (Matt 5:37) and Paul urges us in his letter to the Ephesians to speak the truth in love (Eph 4:5)

It's okay, of course, to be like the second wise man in the story, to tell the truth in different ways, but we need to be careful that what we say is the truth, and not just part of the truth, and certainly not just something nice to hear.

Sometimes, the truth will shock, and sometimes it will pay to speak the truth in a harsh way. I remember learning to drive in the mid eighties, and my Dad took me to various new new estates under construction - on the weekends there were lots of nicely laid out empty

roads to drive on. My Dad would give me instructions – you know: slow down, try a different gear, keep left and so on. All good things to tell me.

But on the rare occasions when we met another car coming toward us, and I was trying to juggle three pedals, gearstick and a steering wheel, and as a result drifting into the middle of the road – or straight toward the oncoming car, my Dad’s instruction was a lot firmer. And a lot louder.

But it was necessary. It was the same truth. Same person speaking the truth. But delivered differently.

Our two bible readings today, are like that. They talk about the choices we have, but they’re delivered differently. One is a pleasant message, the other is harsh and urgent, but today, they’re not the way you expect.

Our New Testament reading, from Luke 13 the words of Jesus “But unless you repent, you too will all perish.” (Luke 13:5b)

Repent or perish. That’s what Jesus says – to the people who were listening then, but also to us.

Repent. Change your ways. Turn to back to God. Put your trust and hope and future in Jesus, and you will have life. But if you don’t do that, then you will surely die.

That’s the truth: It’s a harsh truth, but it’s the truth. Our favourite verse of the bible, John 3:16 says “For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life.”

But it follows that those who don’t believe in him will not have eternal life and will perish.

Today’s reading from Isaiah, though, tells us the same truth, but it tells it in a different way.

Isaiah 55 is one of the servant songs of Isaiah. It is the prophet Isaiah sharing the words of the servant of God, the suffering servant, who we Christians identify as Jesus, and his sharing those words with the people – and indeed with us today.

And it begins with an invitation “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to, the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat!

Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.” (Isaiah 55:1)

The invitation is for everyone, everyone who is thirsty, to come to the waters. We know everyone thirsts, everyone needs water, and the servant says come to the waters. And it brings to mind the conversation recorded in John’s gospel (4:1-26) between Jesus and the Samaritan woman at the well, where Jesus spoke of the living water and said “...those who drink of the water that I will give them will never be thirsty. The water that I will give will become in them a spring of water gushing up to eternal life.”

Or to the sermon on the mount (Matt 4:6) where Jesus said, “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.”

And what Jesus offers is free – you have no money? No problem. Buy wine and milk – don’t worry it has no price. Because someone else has already paid.

And speaking of hunger, Isaiah 55:2 “Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?”

Have you ever found yourself standing in front of the fridge, trying to find something to satisfy a hunger? Or maybe not a hunger... but maybe a desire for...something nice.

You aren’t looking for anything specific, but you know you want to fill a longing. You probably know everything in that fridge... and yet you look and hope for something nice.

And it can be like that with our lives in so many ways... we want something... something better... something to satisfy ourselves.

A couple of years ago, I was at Bunnings, as I often am, and I was queuing at the paint counter. When I say queuing, there was me, and the couple being served. So I waited. I needed some paint tinted. I had the tin of paint to be tinted. I had a post-it note with the name of the shade I needed on it. The couple in front of me weren’t quite so easy to serve.

They wanted to paint the inside of a footstool blue. And they wanted a very precise shade of blue. I don’t remember the precise details, but it was something like half way between one of the shades on page 12 of the Dulux catalog and page 7 of the Taubmans catalog, and surely the man at the counter would be able to mix something to suit.

And he can. He mixed it up and spread it on a piece of paper, and got the heat gun and dried it out... how’s this?

“Oh, it’s too blue – can we try it a little less blue?”

At this point, my 4 litres of paint was getting heavy so I put it on the counter, and watched as this poor guy mixed up two more sample pots.

The third one was not perfect, but they thought they would settle for it. After all it was on the inside of a footstool and they wouldn’t see it much.

“What finish would you like? Satin, semi-gloss or gloss?”

“What’s the difference?”

So he rolled his eyes and explained the difference. And they eventually settled on semi-gloss. So he went and got a can of semi-gloss base colour.

Oh we don’t want that much!

And on it went.

Probably half an hour later after they got the paint counter, this couple walked off with more paint than they wanted, which cost more than they wanted to pay, in a finish they weren't sure they wanted, in a shade of blue that wasn't quite right. Why?

“Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy??”

We find ourselves wanting...something... paint... a snack... a relationship... a home... a church... but so often we're not satisfied. The result might be ...okay.... But it's not right.

So often, the empty spot we try to fill isn't in our stomachs or inside our footstools, but the empty spot is in our hearts. We desire more than this world can provide. Nothing in this world will fill the void.

We may not recognise it as such, but everyone knows the feeling of dissatisfaction that seeps into our hearts.

But the servant says “Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good, and you will delight in the richest of fare.”

What satisfies us, what fills the void in our hearts, isn't of this world. It's from God. “Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good.” Forget about the bread and eat rich food. Don't worry about the wealth of this world but think instead about the riches of the kingdom of God.

Verse 3 says “Give ear and come to me; listen, that you may live.”

We need to listen to God. Go way back to Deuteronomy 8:3, which Jesus quoted when he was tempted by the devil in the wilderness “one does not live by bread alone, but by every word that comes from the mouth of the Lord”.

The servant says “listen, that you may live.” Listening is more than just hearing what he says, but responding to it. What the servant leaves unsaid is what happens if we don't listen.

Skipping ahead to verse 6, we read “Seek the Lord while he may be found; call on him while he is near.”

We need to think about what that means... seek the Lord while he may be found, call upon him while he is near.

There is only a certain amount of time, and it's called "life". You can find him any time during that life, but when it is over, your time is up. That's why he says you must seek the Lord while He may be found. You just never know how long life will be. But if your life ends before you've sought the Lord and called on him, then that's it: your life ends.

That's the “or perish” part from our gospel reading, but Isaiah also covers the “repent” part: “Let the wicked forsake their ways and the unrighteous their thoughts. Let them turn to the Lord,”

Which is exactly repenting is: let the wicked stop being wicked. Let those who are thinking bad things stop thinking bad things. And let them come into relationship with God.

And then he continues “and he will have mercy on them, and to our God, for he will freely pardon.”

God will pardon. God will forgive. God will always forgive. No matter what we have done or said or thought, and no matter how long ago we have done or said or thought it, and no matter how often we have done or said or thought it, God will forgive us. That is the great gift of God to us through his Son.

The cost of forgiveness is huge, but it's already been paid by Jesus giving himself up for us on the cross.

Go back to the beginning of the Isaiah reading: “Come, all you who are thirsty, come to the waters; and you who have no money, come, buy and eat! Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost..” No money? No problem. Because someone else has paid. And that someone was Jesus.

No one else can pay, and no one else can satisfy the longings of our hearts. There is a great gulf between people and God, a gulf that no human can cross... but God did.

Verse 8 and 9 “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,” declares the Lord. “As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts.”

Jesus is the perfect example of God's ways being higher - and different - than our own. Why would all powerful God become a man? But he did. The world would expect all powerful God to arrive on earth in glory, not humility like Jesus. Death is defeat and the end, - or so the world thought. But Jesus' death was not a defeat, it was a victory.

We often ponder questions about God, about why God did things in particular ways (and we certainly have been in our Lent bible study), but there are many things that we simply don't know.

We just have no way of knowing what God is doing from moment to moment - other than by listening to him through reading the scriptures and through prayer. God says to call upon him, and he will answer.

He says to come to him - come to the waters - and he will provide all that we need. He doesn't say anything about giving us everything that we want, because there is no end to human wanting, but God will provide all that we need, for everlasting life. It may not feel like it, and it may not feel like we are doing anything big or important or valuable, but those judgments are not ours to make. Not if we are his people.

Isaiah calls the people to God. To faith in God. He highlights the futility of those who pursue things of no real value - things that will perish with them and with the using of them. Why spend money on what is not bread, and your labour on what does not satisfy?

Instead, he calls us to listen to him, and to trust in him. Listen, so that you may live.

Seek the Lord. Listen to his word. Trust that he knows you - and that he loves you. He has proven that love on the cross. As we remind ourselves each week in church, Our sins are forgiven. Even when things don't seem to be going right to you, his ways are just different, higher, better.

So today, and always, listen, that you may live.

Amen.