

From Where Comes Help?

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[0 : 00] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 10th of January 1999.

The preacher is Paul Barker. His sermon is entitled From Where Comes Help? and is from Isaiah chapter 31 verse 1 to chapter 32 verse 8.

And I'll pray for us. O Lord our God, we know that unless you work within us, opening our eyes to see you, our ears to hear you, and our hearts to respond to you with faith, then your word will fall on deaf ears and blind eyes and stubborn hearts.

So we pray, work your spirit in us as we hear your word and change us to be better servants of Jesus Christ. For we ask this in his name. Amen.

Several years ago in another parish, I was door knocking people in the parish and came across a lady who had had some church connection.

[1 : 34] And she assured me that she had faith. So I asked her, what did she have faith in? And she pondered for a minute and said, I have faith in fellow human beings.

And I said to her that I was very sorry for her. She was a bit taken aback by that, I must say. I was sorry for her because people let us down all the time.

Because humanity doesn't have the answers. We don't have to look far into our world to see the stupidity of placing our faith in people who break down our trust, who can't solve wars.

Our world is, we all recognise, in some form of mess. Occasionally people come out with stupid statements saying how much we're progressing generation by generation and how great humanity is and we're going to solve the world's problems.

But another millennium is about to dawn and I'm not sure that we're any better off than we were a thousand years ago. Not though I was here to check. We can't control nature, we can't stop wars, we can't keep each other happy or rich or anything else.

[2 : 48] I think faith in humanity is stupid. At least that woman was honest because even though hers was a rare answer, I think it's a fairly common statement or belief.

There are lots of people who have faith in humanity. Just yesterday in the paper, I wish I'd remembered which article it was, but somebody was telling a story of some life incident and at the end of a good event they said, and it restored my faith in humanity.

And I thought, well, I really am sorry for you because I think that faith in humanity will be let down time and time again. There are lots of people, on the other hand, who say they have faith in God and yet by their practice it seems they place their faith in humanity rather than God.

So when a problem comes, which is a problem another person actually causes, they complain to God. But they don't see that it's actually a human problem. Their actions so often betray their lack of faith in God.

What some people call existentialist Christianity, a Christianity where God doesn't actually intervene in this world. He doesn't actually get involved. That the world is really in the end under our control or the control of human beings generally.

[4 : 10] That God is really rather remote. It's a deistic worldview, is what it's called. God is not active. There are many for whom their life motto is in effect, God helps those who help themselves.

But that's a very humanist Christian view. It's not really in the end Christian. God helps those who help themselves, says, well I must help myself.

That is, I must solve my problems. I must bring about the answers. In the end, that's placing faith in me or other people rather than an almighty God.

I think we determine or we see by people's actions where their faith is really placed. When people seem to place their faith in worldly security, then it is clear that they are not placing their faith in God.

When they place their faith in their job or their marriage or their family or their health or their wealth or their insurance company or their bank or their government, or all the other mechanisms or means by which they can build up around them a secure and stable and happy lifestyle.

[5 : 28] That is faith in human beings, not faith in God. Now that's not to say that all of those things aren't good, nor to say that within that network there ought not to be some sort of trust either.

But to make us our ultimate foundation stone of faith those things I've just mentioned is to make ourselves very vulnerable indeed because human beings, human beings' institutions let us down time and time again.

And when we place our confidence in such things other than in God then it is what we might say a carnal confidence rather than a godly confidence.

confidence. Now they're the sorts of issues perhaps modernised that ancient Israel was facing at the time of the prophet Isaiah 720 or 30 BC thereabouts give or take a few years.

Their confidence their security their faith was being placed in worldly things rather than in God the maker of the world.

[6 : 36] That's the issue in the first verse. Alas for those who go down to Egypt for help that is placing their faith and trust and hope and confidence and security in another nation.

A pagan nation at that relatively strong on the world stage but as I said last week it's sort of like Russia today. It's a has-been world power still fairly powerful but by comparison to the United States very weak and by comparison to ancient Assyria ancient Egypt in Isaiah's day was no match.

That was worldly faith or worldly security or faith in humanity and as we'll see it was rather stupid. Their faith in Egypt was also a faith in their horses.

Now I'm not a horse person some of you I know are. I don't particularly care for them all that much and so I don't think that I'm all that vulnerable to placing my faith in horses and certainly not being a gambler either.

But Israel's faith being placed in horses and chariots as verse 1 says is looking for the greatest weapon. For us it's the B-52s or the cruise missiles as I said last week.

[7 : 51] For them horses were a very strategic weapon in warfare and it seems that God's people Israel and Judah didn't have all that many Egypt had lots of them. So that's where their faith turned to a slightly stronger power that had a slightly better weapon and as we saw last week such weapons are nothing by comparison to God.

Judah, Israel the people of God that is are calling out to other people for help. That's where they're placing their faith and security and confidence and it will come unstuck as we saw last week and as is developed in this chapter tonight as well.

Worldly wisdom said you need horses and chariots if you're going to be strong but godly wisdom says otherwise. Verse 2 begins by saying yet he too that is God implied he too is wise and brings disaster.

there's an implied rebuke here I think. You think you're wise you think Egypt is wise or your royal officials are wise God is wise implication God is even wiser and God's wisdom will bring disaster. He doesn't call back his words but will rise against the house of the evildoers that is the house of God's own people and against the helpers of those who work iniquity.

[9 : 22] Notice what it's saying about God's people here. Their lack of faith in God means that they are evildoers. We might think that somebody without faith is a good person but just doesn't happen to have faith but in God's eyes somebody without faith in God is an evildoer a worker of iniquity verse 2 says.

That's probably not the way we think morally of people today. But it's so true because as we see time and time again in the Bible faith and its practice are inseparable.

Faith in God will lead to godly practice. No faith in God will necessarily lead to ungodly practice. They will be therefore doers of evil or workers of iniquity.

God is saying here that his plans are certain. His plans are sure. He will not recall his word. That is he won't change his mind. He won't issue a new edict or something like that.

God has decreed disaster and it will happen and you can be sure about that. Now verse 3 in a sense sums up this in very stark ways.

[10 : 38] The Egyptians they're just human and not God. Their horses are just flesh flesh and not spirit.

But when the Lord stretches out his hand he only has to stretch out his hand. It doesn't actually symbolise or signify much effort on God's part.

When he stretches out his hand the helper Egypt presumably will stumble and the one helped God's own people Judah and Israel they'll fall. That is you're trusting Egypt but God's far superior than that.

They're just humans they're just flesh. Your faith is placed in the wrong place. Now in the end what this is calling Israel and Judah to do is to see to judge not by appearances not by worldly wisdom but rather by God's standards.

Bring God into the equation. Their judgment of the world politically and economically was Egypt is worth trusting here. But bring God into the equation and we see how weak and ineffective Egypt is.

[11 : 50] It would be like Australia today saying we're about to be overrun by the United States of America let's appeal to Indonesia for help. Politically there might be something in that.

Probably not but there might be something. But spiritually we recognise its folly. For God is the supreme power. God is far greater than Assyria or its modern equivalence.

God is greater than Egypt as well. That may not look that in our world. Time and time again you see we think in terms in our world in terms that put God way out there a deistic view where God exists but he doesn't actually intervene.

He just sort of sits and floats in the sky watching from a distance as that song a few years ago said. We've got to be, if we have to be Christians to look at our world with God's eyes.

To see him as a proactive God, a God who is involved in this world, a God whose word will be fulfilled and who calls us to trust in that same word. We've got to recognise that what we think is the world's wisdom, and we think it's so clever, is by comparison to God's wisdom, folly.

[13 : 08] and stupidity. We've got to think that what looks to be so strong in our world, and it does look strong, and right, and invulnerable, is by comparison to God's strength, weak, and nothing.

God, time and time again in the Bible, works in those ways, works in the ways that look weak, that look stupid, but in the long term are strong and wise.

and the best example of that, of course, is the cross. Jesus' death looked to be stupidity, and it looked to be a weakling, but as St.

Paul reminds the Corinthians, it is the strength and wisdom of God, and that is far stronger than worldly strength, and far wiser than worldly wisdom.

wisdom. Now, so far in verses 1 to 3, Isaiah is painting a negative picture. He's warning the people not to place their trust in the wrong place.

[14 : 13] He's saying that in effect Egypt cannot help you. Now he turns to the positive. Okay, if Egypt can't help, where now positively do we place trust?

He's hinted at it in verse 3 by saying the Egyptians are human and not God, but now positively he paints an extraordinary picture in verses 4 to 5. Now, let me remind you here that the issue is not so much faith itself, but where faith is placed.

The issue is not, well, I'm a person who's got lots of faith, but the issue is, where do I place my faith? Place it in humanity, and it doesn't matter how sincere you are or how much faith you've got, it's a waste of time.

But place a little faith in a powerful God, and that is sufficient for eternity. It's where you place your faith that matters, not how much it is.

Where is it placed? And so he commends God as the place in whom to place faith in verses 4 to 5. Now these verses paint two pictures of God.

[15 : 25] Strange picture, the first one. God is a lion. ferocious, ferocious, and strong. And at first sight, it looks as though God is actually destroying his own people here.

As a lion or a young lion growls over its prey, and God's own people is the prey here, and when a band of shepherds is called out against it, is not terrified by their shouting, or daunted at their noise, so the Lord of hosts will come down to fight upon Mount Zion and upon its hill.

Now what that's saying is this, a lion would attack a sheep in a sheepfold, and a shepherd may gather other shepherds and come shouting and ranting and waving sticks. Usually it wouldn't frighten the lion away.

The sheep's gone. The lion will not give up its prey. He will hang on and hang on and hang on, and human beings, mere human beings, will not terrify the lion.

That's the picture Isaiah uses about God. God will hang on to Jerusalem, to God's own people.

[16:34] He will not let it go, and these mere shepherds, these mere humans in this imagery in verse 4, that's the Egyptian army, it may even be some of the people of Judah as well, it may be the Assyrian army, it doesn't matter.

God's not scared of them, and he's not going to let Jerusalem go. You see, this is a picture of God's perseverance or determination to hang on to his people.

It's his commitment to them, but it's not a commitment to a people who are faithful or good. It's a commitment to God's people who are in fact not placing their faith in God.

It's an extraordinary statement about God's commitment to his people. They fail, but God hangs on to them. And that's what counts, isn't it? Not how hard we hang on to God in life, but how hard he hangs on to us.

And I tell you, I'd much rather rely on him hanging on to me than me on to him. This is an amazing picture of God's commitment to a sinful people. They keep failing.

[17:36] They keep turning every which way but him. And God's now saying, I will hang on to you like a lion to its prey. You will not get me off.

You will not prize me off this prey, even if you get all the armies of Egypt and Assyria against Jerusalem. I will not let it go. A great picture of God.

Verse 5 compliments it because God now is a bird, a hovering bird, a bird that stretches out its wings to protect its young. That's the picture probably here. And he's protecting Jerusalem.

He will protect it, deliver it, spare it, and rescue it. Four verbs. Some suggest that it's because God is surrounding it in all four directions of the compass. He will protect his people.

This is a tender picture, a picture of if you like a mother bird with its little fragile dependent children birds in the nest. We go from a lion to a bird but both are just as true about God.

[18:36] He's both. He's strong, ferocious, and fierce. And he's tender and protecting and caring as well. And he's all of those things despite the fact that his own people keep placing their trust in something else.

Now this is a great statement of mercy, a great statement of compassion of God. There was nothing that Israel or Judah was doing that warranted such response by God.

It wasn't because they were good or faithful but he said, okay, in reward I'll do this. It's to a sinful people. And it precedes the call in verse 6 to repent.

Verse 6 says, turn back to him, literally repent, whom you have deeply betrayed, O people of Israel. You see, mercy does not come as a response to repentance.

As though when I repent of my sin and when I turn away from my wrongdoing and turn to God, then God will show me mercy. But rather God's mercy comes first. God's mercy is the impetus to my repentance.

[19:54] And yes, as we'll see in verse 8, there's more mercy to flow on after repentance. But mercy comes first. Mercy, you see, is completely unmerited, unwarranted.

It is God's initiative. It is God's prerogative. And it comes before I repent. What an amazing God this is, who shows mercy to a faithless, unrepentant people so that they may repent and come to renewed faith.

And of course, that's the gospel, isn't it? God is like that. He's shown each one of us mercy long before we ever repented of our sins. He sent His Son to die in the example par excellence of mercy. And He did that while we were His enemies. Not after we'd repented of our sin. His mercy comes first.

And it should prompt us and stir us to turn back to Him with acts of repentance and faith. Verse 6 says that, Turn back to Him, to God, whom you have deeply betrayed.

[21:07] That implies a particular relationship, an exclusive relationship really, between God and His own people. And they've betrayed Him. Like an adulterer betrays his spouse or her spouse by going and having a relationship with somebody else, God's people, by placing their faith in Egypt or anything else for that matter, have betrayed Him.

Have betrayed His love that has come to them in the past. Their betrayal, their faith in Egypt is just like idolatry, verse 7 says.

For on that day all of you shall throw away your idols of silver and idols of gold which your hands have sinfully made for you. It may well be that they have literally idols of silver and gold that they've made.

That may well be part of the influence of the Egyptian trust that they're placing. But also I think their idolatry is seen in just the fact that they place their faith and trust in Egypt.

That's idolatry. When we place our faith or trust in something other than God, we are practising idolatry of that thing, that person, that institution.

[22 : 17] Whether it's our spouse or our job or our bank or our house or our wealth or whatever it is, when we place so much confidence in faith in that thing or that person, then we are practising idolatry.

Repentance, you see, is not just saying sorry and going on with how we live our lives. Repentance is turning away and throwing the idols out. And it doesn't matter how much the gold and silver is worth.

They're tossed out. That's real repentance going on here. Isaiah returns to this promise of God's acting in verses 8 and 9. Assyria, this superpower, the one whom Israel Judah is scared of at this time.

They'll fall by a sword. Yes, God will bring them down. He doesn't need Egypt to do it. He can do it himself. It's not a sword of mortals, notice in verse 8. Not a sword of humans that will destroy Assyria.

God doesn't need people, you see, to bring about such victory. God will do it himself. Thank you very much. Don't go looking for a bigger power. God's not going to save those who help themselves.

[23 : 26] God will help those who are helpless. And he can do it all by himself. Without our help or Egypt's help, Assyria will flee. And within 20, maybe 30 years of these words, it exactly happened.

Assyria came to the very gates of Jerusalem. All the country towns were destroyed. We've got records not only of the Bible, but other Israelite records that are kept on stone that have been found, and also the Assyrian records that have been found.

If you can picture Victoria, except that Judah was much smaller, the records show they've come to Bendigo, and Bendigo's gone. And now we can see the flame of the beacon of the next town, Castlemaine, it's gone.

And Kyneton's gone. And Ballarat's gone. And they've now come to the very edge of the city, to the gates. And then God smote the army of the Assyrians.

And they fled and panicked. And Jerusalem stood firm, just as God promised. But probably this prophecy here is not totally summed up in those events of 701 BC.

[24 : 42] 80 or 90 years later, Assyria, the empire fell. Yes, it still stood after this event at Jerusalem, but the empire itself fell in 612 to the Babylonians, never to rise again, when its capital Nineveh was destroyed in 612.

But in the end, this prophecy is looking forward to a day, not when God will just defeat Assyria, but when God will defeat all of his enemies, and all of the enemies of God's people, once and for all. And he'll do it by himself, without our help, or without the help of anyone else. I imagine that today, there'd be many who would counsel Judah in the predicament it was in, by saying, okay, you don't have to go to Egypt, but think positively.

Believe in yourself. You'll stand firm. Trust in your own ability, your own wisdom and skill and ingenuity. Think positively of yourself, and you'll stand firm.

Maybe I've caricatured it a bit, but that's very predominant in our society, isn't it? So much power of positive thinking, the power of self-esteem and thinking well and powerfully of yourself.

[26 : 03] You don't find that in the Bible at all. Trust in God, not yourself. The power of positive thinking and self-esteem taken too far is, again, an act of idolatry, and not one that Isaiah ever counsels.

Only God can save, and without our help. And we must trust in him. Now, if this chapter, well, this chapter does end here, but if this whole segment ended here, it would be all very well at one point. Jerusalem will stand and Assyria will go. But then what would happen? All the problems that have led to this point will just keep recycling.

There will be another bad king, another act of idolatry. They'll go after another nation and form an alliance with it and place their trust in it, and it'll end up in another cycle, going downwards into idolatry and strife and danger.

Time and again, the Bible shows us that cycle. When God acts to save, as he's going to do here by defeating Assyria, the same old problems recur.

[27 : 16] When God sent the flood, and Noah and his family were saved, at the end of the flood, God looked on the hearts of Noah and his family, and he made the same assessment of them that he made of humanity in general before the flood.

Nothing's changed. Noah and his family are spared, but their hearts are still evil and wicked, and the same problems of the world are going to develop. And if you read on into Genesis 11, you see it all happening just again.

And the same thing happens with the Exodus. God saves his people from Egypt with a mighty hand and an outstretched arm under Moses, and he brings them out of their salvation. They haven't even crossed the Red Sea before they're complaining and not trusting God, and the same problems happen again.

And you bring them into the Promised Land, a mighty parting of the river, a mighty fall of Jericho, the first city, and you come to the second city and what happens?

But the people continue to sin and trust in themselves and others rather than in God. Acts of salvation like this, in a sense, don't change the people who are saved.

[28 : 24] What is needed is an internal change, a transformation on the inside, if you like. And that's what chapter 32 goes on to say.

You see, in a sense we are saved entirely by Jesus' death on the cross, but there's a sense in which, left at Jesus' death on the cross, we may be forgiven, but we're unchanged people.

What we need is transformation, the sending of God's Spirit. And that's the same sort of thing that is anticipated in chapter 32. Indeed, in verse 15, which we're not going to get to, there looks at, anticipates a Spirit from on high that will be poured out.

But verses 1 to 8 look forward to a promised king who will come, a righteous king in verse 1. This will be a king who is different from all the other kings.

The king at this time is probably Hezekiah, who was a very good king. But as we'll see in the next couple of Wednesday nights, even he failed and failed badly. This king will be righteous perfectly.

[29 : 31] This will break the cycle. This will be a king who will transform his nation internally. Hezekiah could only manufacture external reform.

He could only pull out the idols from the temple and decree laws about sacrifices and festivals. He couldn't change the insides of people's hearts. But this king will do it. This king who comes in righteousness, as we'll see, will do it.

Righteousness and justice are things that are absent in Israel and Judah of Isaiah's day. We've seen that time and again, chapter 1, chapter 2 and so on. But this king will bring righteousness, the internal attitude of what is right, and justice, its external practice, into being when he comes to reign as king.

It's clear that this is the king that's promised back in chapter 9 and chapter 11, passages we looked at before Christmas in the morning service, clearly looking ultimately to Jesus Christ.

His rule is described in verse 2. A strange sort of verse in a way, but it's telling us that this king will bring real protection, real security, real provision for his people.

[30 : 39] They won't need to find security or protection anywhere else, but from this king in righteousness. He'll provide for them carefully and graciously. In a dry place, he'll provide streams of water and so on.

This is probably in contrast to so many bad kings who lorded it over the people, who extorted taxes from them, drove them into harsh labour and so on.

This is a king who will care for his people. And the effect of that, verse 3 and 4? The transformation I've mentioned already. The eyes of those who have sight will not be closed.

The ears of those who have hearing will listen. The minds of the rash will have good judgment and the tongues of stammerers will speak readily and distinctly. Eyes, ears, mind and lips.

Four things. That time and again in Isaiah we are found in God's people to be shut. Eyes that do not see God. Ears that do not hear his word.

[31 : 45] Minds or hearts, same word, that are stubborn or hard or cold to God. And lips that will not speak his word or praise. But now they're being changed by this righteous king.

Now the eyes will be opened. Now the ears will hear. Now the minds and the hearts will be responsive to God's words and the tongues will be able to speak God's praise and word and purpose.

The things that happened to Isaiah himself in the temple in that vision, when the burning coal came off the altar of the holy God and touched his lips and changed him, will now happen for the people when this righteous king will come.

We were told then in chapter 6 that Isaiah's mission would be in one sense a futile mission because it would meet with deaf ears and blind eyes and stubborn hearts.

But when the righteous king comes, all that will be changed. The people will be changed on the inside. This transformation is exactly what the Holy Spirit is doing in the New Testament, changing Christian people from the inside that they may have ears to hear and eyes to see and hearts to respond to God.

[33 : 01] This is what the Old Testament prophesies in many other places. When it looks forward to a new covenant being written on the heart, this is it. Same prophecy in effect. When it looks forward to the heart being circumcised in Deuteronomy 30, when in Deuteronomy 29 we hear that to this day the Lord has not yet given you ears, eyes and heart to respond appropriately and accordingly.

But that day is coming. And Isaiah says that day is coming and coming soon. One result of that, just one, verses 5 to 8, is that folly and wisdom will now be discerned properly.

This is the issue that's already floated around in previous chapters. The people think they're wise. They may be wise by worldly standards but not by God's. And now, when their heart, their ears, their eyes are right with God, then they will see what real wisdom is.

Then they will see that God's wisdom predominates over worldly wisdom and God's strength is more powerful than human strength. Currently, verse 5 tells us that fools are in positions of leadership.

They're nobles. Look around the world today and nothing much has changed, it seems to me. Their wisdom was to go to Egypt for help. But that's folly.

[34 : 31] Rather now, the people will discern the truth. It's explained in verses 6 and 7 that fools speak folly and so on. And verse 8 goes on to tell us that in the end, the result will be that those who are noble will plan noble things rather than the fools who will be in charge.

Isn't that a picture of our time? Of a confusion between folly and wisdom or nobility? A moral confusion where fools are in command, where stupidity is sprouting forth in the very upper echelons of our society, time and again?

Don't be misled by worldly wisdom. For much of it is folly. And don't be deceived by appearances of worldly strength either.

For much of that is just weakness. Toss out your idols, your false security blankets, and place your faith and its accompanying action in God and God alone.

Years ago, the Commonwealth Bank had a slogan, unlike its slogan today, about which bank. Their slogan then was, perhaps a little bit more encouraging, get with the strength.

[35 : 59] Well, banks are not the ultimate strength. But it's a good slogan to think in terms of God. Get with the strength. Not Egypt or Assyria.

Not anything else in this world in which we place our trust. But God. He's the strength and He's the wisdom. And without Him anything else is pure folly and weakness.

Let's have a moment to reflect on God's word and how it may apply to our own lives before we sing our next song. And I've been given today. Amen.

Thank you of God.