

A Child Called Immanuel

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[0 : 0 0] . Geoff Kennett says that we should keep religion out of politics. He's not the first to say that and nor, I suspect, will he be the last.

All around the world, religion and politics are mixed. There are Anglican bishops who sit in the House of Lords in England. We know very well the mixture of politics and religion, so-called, in Northern Ireland or in Iran or even in secular Israel.

We might be able to remember back 40 years to the ALP-DLP split and some of the religious involvement and influences in that and so on. The world is full of plenty of examples, many of them bad, of the mixture between religion and politics.

But just because the world is full of so many bad examples does not mean that religion and politics ought never to be mixed. Indeed, the Bible is full of examples where they are and ought to be involved together.

Especially in the Old Testament we see that. For in the Old Testament the people of God is not a church like today, scattered amongst the world, but rather the people of God was a nation.

[1 : 2 0] Or in fact, at one point, two nations, Israel and Judah. And there inevitably and deliberately religious influence, the influence of the God of the Bible, was brought to bear in the political affairs of the nation.

Since Old Testament times there never has been nor never will be a nation of the people of God as it was in ancient Israel. But since God is the God of all things, public and private, inevitably there will be and must be Christian involvement in political affairs and issues of faith brought to bear in that sphere.

In 734 BC, King Ahaz had a political dilemma. We're very used to reading about political dilemmas in the daily paper and no doubt the daily Jewish Jerusalem Chronicle or whatever it was then called would have been filled with the dilemma of the time.

And no doubt all the political pundits would have given their opinions. All the sort of, what is it, the current affair programs or the 730 report equivalents would have all pontificated on what King Ahaz ought to do in this political dilemma.

His dilemma was this. Should he form an alliance with the re-emerging world superpower, Assyria, which lay well to the north but was growing in influence, as it had been a century before, and was threatening further south?

[3 : 0 1] Or, should King Ahaz form a three-way alliance with the country's immediate two neighbours to the north? Ahaz is the king of Judah.

Judah is the southern part of Israel. Should he form an alliance with Ephraim, another name for the northern part of Israel, and Syria, which is still today called Syria, or should he go with the re-emerging world superpower, Assyria, to the north?

Assyria and Syria have nothing to do with each other. That's his dilemma. What ought he do? Syria and Ephraim had formed a coalition.

They were relatively small nations, and between them represented little threat to the might of Assyria, further north. What they sought to do was to bring off three-way alliance and get Judah involved, but Judah resisted, and King Ahaz said no, and King Ahaz, in fact, had paid tribute to Assyria.

Not in the sense of saying, oh, how wonderful you are, not that sort of tribute, but rather paying money and wealth to this mighty superpower in order to be on friendly terms with them so that they wouldn't come further south and conquer them.

[4 : 22] Syria and Ephraim didn't like that. They decided to depose Judah's king and put their own king in their place. I'm sure we can think of many examples this century of mighty world superpowers who are putting their own puppet kings, in effect, on the throne of foreign governments in order to have a friendly nation somewhere else in the world.

That's what Syria and Ephraim were trying to do, get rid of Ahaz and his heirs and put their own person in his place. That's the situation described in verses 1 and 2 of Isaiah chapter 7, the first reading that was read for us today.

In the face of this dilemma, Ahaz the king and the people of Judah were terrified. Syria and Ephraim were marching south.

They'd already defeated Judah's army in a battle and now it seemed that Jerusalem was their target. And no doubt there were many reports of massive troop movements elsewhere in the country and it seemed that Jerusalem was now the target for a siege and battle.

Not that these two nations really wanted to conquer Judah so much as to put their own king on its throne. When a nation and its capital are besieged by foreign nations in the ancient world, often the way that the city was defeated was not through a pitched battle, but more because a siege meant no access to the city, therefore no supply of water and food, and in the end the people inside would either die or give up.

[6 : 04] That certainly happened in the ancient world many times. Many of you may know the story of Masada, a Jewish stronghold that held out for three years against the Romans before in the end they realised it was a futile thing and they committed suicide to stop the Romans having the joy of killing them.

But there at Masada, on top of this mountain overlooking the Dead Sea, the ancient Jews had dug out from solid rock cisterns that held, I think it was one and a quarter million gallons of water, enough for a thousand people to last well over three years, even if there was no rain in that time.

That's how important water was for a city that might be under siege. And in Megiddo further north in Israel today there is a great big shaft and a tunnel in order to bring water in from outside the wall into the city.

Now in Jerusalem in King Ahaz's day, the 730 BC, the water supply was outside the city walls. It was vulnerable. You wouldn't have to besiege Jerusalem for long for it to run out of water.

And King Ahaz, it seems in verse 3, has gone out to the Fuller's Field, that is the place where washing would be done, in order to inspect the water supply. He's so afraid. He's wondering how on earth will we be able to survive if the armies of Syria and Ephraim come and besiege Jerusalem.

[7 : 28] Jerusalem itself is fairly safe as a defensive city. The trouble is its water supply. Little wonder that 30 years after King Ahaz, Hezekiah, one of his successors, built a tunnel half a kilometre long through solid rock to channel water from an outside spring inside the walls, a tunnel that you can still walk through today through the water.

There's a little advert for a trip to Israel next year. Ahaz is worried. He's out inspecting the water supply. And God sends the prophet Isaiah to meet him there and to speak words to him there.

We may expect that his words would be words of rebuke. They are more words of encouragement and assurance. Surprising in one sense, given that Ahaz was not a good king.

In verse 4, Isaiah says to the king, Take heed, be quiet, do not fear, and do not let your heart be faint because of the enemy that's approaching.

Words similar to those spoken to Joshua before the people of Israel walked in and conquered the promised land. Isaiah's words of encouragement and assurance here go on to, in a sense, denigrate the opposition.

[8 : 51] He calls the opposition two smouldering stumps of firebrands. Yes, they are fierce, he goes on to say, but in reality, they're just smouldering stumps.

They've had their day. They're past their use-by date. There's smoke but no fire. It's nothing really to be afraid of. Don't be afraid. Words of assurance and comfort.

Also, perhaps, words of mild rebuke. Ahaz, you've got nothing to be afraid of. What are you afraid of? Rebuking him for his fear. It's quite a put-down of the opposition.

The king of Israel, Ephraim, is not even mentioned by name. His name's Pekah, but it's just the son of Remaliah that gets emphasised in verse 4 and so on because it's nothing to be afraid of.

They're just people. The son of Remaliah, he's not really a legitimate king. Remaliah wasn't the king. He's a person who's usurped the throne. Nothing to be afraid of at all.

[9 : 50] He goes on to say in verses 5 and 6, yes, they are plotting against you. Yes, they're wanting to put a king on your throne. The son of Tabeel, somebody we don't know, probably not even a person of the nation of Judah.

These are the plans of kings. But these are the plans of human kings. They may look ferocious and fearful, but you ought not be afraid, King Ahaz, because the words of the king, the sovereign king of the world, God himself, come in verse 7.

And in response to the human king's plans, these words are startling. God says, it shall not stand and it shall not come to pass.

All the political machinations, all the military might of Syria and Ephraim combined will come to nothing because God says so. Because the real king says so.

Their authority is nothing. Their authority is just human, he says. That's the point of verse 8 and the beginning of verse 9. The head of Aram, that is another name for Syria, Aram, is Damascus.

[11 : 01] That's its capital city still today. And the head of Damascus is Rez and its king, but that's nothing is the implication of that statement. The same for the beginning of verse 9 about Ephraim and its capital Samaria and its king, the son of Remaliah, is again not even mentioned by name.

They're nothing. In 65 years, Ephraim will be depopulated and devastated and that came true. 20 years later, the nation was conquered and another 45 years later, it was repopulated by the Assyrians and the nation never more existed.

The opposition's nothing. Now the point of these words of Isaiah is this. This ferocious and powerful opposition, humanly speaking, faces Judah.

But when you bring a divine perspective to bear, the opposition is nothing to be afraid of. Ahaz was afraid because his world view was one that excluded God.

He only thought in political terms, military terms. And therefore the opposition, yes, is ferocious and fearful. But bring God to bear in the equation and there is nothing to be afraid of.

[12 : 13] Their authority is just human. Judah's ultimate source of power is divine. That's quite a rebuke.

But it's also an invitation at the end of verse 9. If you, King Ahaz, do not stand firm in faith, that is faith in the God of the Bible, you shall not stand at all.

It's an invitation to faith in God. Place your faith in God, King Ahaz, and you will stand firm. For God is bigger than your enemy, the Syrians and Ephraimites.

But if you don't place your faith in God, even though God is more powerful, He will not act for you. And you will not stand at all, if that is the case.

Now, there's an important lesson here, I think, for all of us. Not that we're kings and not that we're army commanders, probably, either. But there is a general principle at work here.

[13 : 13] There are many temptations in our world and our day-to-day life, temptations to consider things without considering God, to think in terms of a worldview that excludes God, to see a situation as hopeless or futile, to see our enemies as being too great for us or whatever the situation may be.

But bring God to bear in the equation and we see things in a different light. There are so many temptations in our world to think purely humanly about the situation and to forget that God is the God of the impossible and able to achieve far more than we can ever imagine or ask.

This applies not only in political thinking, but also in the way we think about our work or our family life or even our leisure life, our health and so on. Bring God to bear on the way that you look at life.

Don't exclude Him from the equation. The invitation to trust at the end of verse 9 gets heightened in verses 10 and 11, an astonishing verse really.

Again the Lord spoke to Ahaz saying, Ask a sign of the Lord your God. Let it be as deep as Sheol, that is the place of the dead, or as high as heaven, the place of God.

[14 : 37] That is, it's an invitation for King Ahaz to ask God for anything at all as a sign to show that God means business here and can be trusted.

That's an amazing invitation. I think it's almost unique in the Bible that somebody is invited to ask anything at all of God. As deep as the place of the dead, as high as the place of God's heaven.

And God will do it in order to show King Ahaz that he can be trusted and to invite him to place his trust in him. God, you see, is bending over backwards to entice Ahaz to have faith in him.

That shows how serious the situation is, that the offer is of such magnitude. Here is a faithless king being given absolutely every encouragement to have faith.

This doesn't always happen. God doesn't always condescend so much to provide such sorts of signs for faithless people. We shouldn't presume that he will do so for us or our friends.

[15 : 45] He's already spoken enough to this world to encourage it to have faith after all. How does Ahaz respond to this magnanimous offer?

He declines. He says with a pretense of piety in verse 12, I will not ask and I will not put the Lord to the test.

What a pious fool. He seems to be alluding to an earlier verse in Deuteronomy that says you shall not put the Lord to the test but he fails to see that what's happening here is not him putting God to the test but rather God putting him to the test.

God's made the offer. He's supposed to take it up but he doesn't. He pretends to be so religiously superior but really he's a hypocrite. He has no faith in God at all.

Yes, that verse does say you shall not put the Lord to the test but that's not what's happening here. And there is a place where we can test God rightly. In the place of faith like Gideon who puts down his fleece.

[16 : 52] Gideon's faith was there in sort of seed form but the test was to bolster his faith. Now we ought to be careful in putting God to the test but from a position of no faith like Ahaz's evidence and signs will not in the end create faith.

It will increase faith that is there but there are very few people who in the end are converted through miracles and signs even in Jesus' own day when he performed them before their faces.

But miracles bolster already existing faith. Ahaz declines the offer. A foolish thing to do.

He illustrates I think what we saw last week in chapter 6 where Isaiah's task is to preach not so that everybody is converted and repent but rather preach and that will lead people further away to God.

It will harden their hearts further. Not because Isaiah is at fault but because his listeners are. And here is the example. Ahaz is far from God lacking in faith. Isaiah's extraordinary offer of assurance and promise is declined.

[18 : 06] And the result is as chapter 6 anticipates Ahaz's heart is further hardened and he goes beyond the point of no return.

Well God is never going to be thwarted by people's lack of faith. His patience with Ahaz runs out. That's the point of verse 13. Here then O house of David is it too little for you to weary mortals that you weary my God also?

Notice how he says my God. When Ahaz was being invited to ask for a sign it's Ahaz your God you can ask for a sign. But now comes this ominous expression pregnant with threat.

It is my God no longer yours as you have renounced him and cut off the relationship. It's too late. God's patience has run out. He's wearied too far now.

And he's now going to act in judgment against you. That's a common theme in the Bible. One that runs through the New Testament as well. The reason the Lord has yet to return is not because he's delayed or got involved watching cricket or something in heaven.

[19 : 17] It's because of his patience with this world. His forbearance allowing us and others time to repent and come to him. But one day that time that patience will run out with this world as it did for Ahaz.

And when the Lord returns it will be too late for people then to repent. We ought not to presume upon that patience and grace we're warned in the New Testament.

Don't sit back thinking oh well God's grace will just keep on lasting forever so at the end of my days I might just repent. Don't presume upon God's grace like that.

For one day it will run out as Ahaz found. But God also will not be thwarted by this lack of acceptance of a sign.

He's going to give a sign anyway. Whether it's the same one he would have given we're not sure. But this sign has got a double side to it like a two-edged sword. God says in verse 14 or Isaiah says Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign.

[20 : 28] You didn't want it but you're going to get it. And this is the sign that you're going to get. Look the young woman is with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Emmanuel.

He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

Who is this person? Who is the young woman? It's clearly a woman who's known. It's not just a young woman it's the young woman.

We're not told her name. The word for the young woman could imply that she is a virgin as we often are told but the word doesn't quite have that specificity about it.

Certainly a woman of marriageable age who does not have children and presumably in that society would mean a virgin. Even now it seems perhaps that she's pregnant.

[21 : 36] That's how imminent we expect this child to be born. It's clearly not Jesus you see that Isaiah has in mind when he speaks these words. Some think that it's the prophet's wife certainly in the very next chapter she gives birth to a child but the child is called another name Mahashal al-Hashbaz not a name that you'd probably want to call your child and I wouldn't want to baptise one called that.

This child it seems is more likely a royal child. The threat has been to depose the king and that in the ancient world as today would mean the destruction of all his heirs just like in say the overthrow by the communists in Russia earlier this century killing off the heirs and so on.

So probably the point of this is to say there is a royal child who's going to be born. This coup threat will come to nothing. The line of the house of David will be preserved.

It's not really it's still a sense of rebuke to Ahaz but it is nonetheless a great promise that God will protect his people and his promised line of kings.

I think it's referring to the same thing that is hinted at at the end of last week's passage the holy seed that will come in the future a royal person to come just a little glimmer a little hint of something very vague and still full of mystery but as we read on in Isaiah and we'll see next week and the week after a bit more detail gets filled in next week we'll see it's clearly a king who will come a child who's given who will be called wonderful counselor prince of peace and then in chapter 11 we see again it's the one who is expected to come is clearly of the line of King David himself.

[23 : 28] this is a royal promise of somebody to be born who will be at one point king and this person will be born soon.

What's the point of the sign? At first light it does look to be a promise an optimistic thing a source of hope even for a king who declined the offer of the sign.

To say that the child will be called God with us does convey a natural positive connotation though it doesn't always apply that way as we'll see but it does suggest a positive future and then to say that before this child can tell the good from evil which is probably a way of saying before he reaches the age of accountability as an adult probably about 20 years old your enemies will be defeated Syria and Ephraim were defeated within 20 years of these words with just 3 years or 4 years later Syria was defeated by Assyria and just 12-13 years later so was Ephraim so it seems to be a statement of promise but there is a sting in the tale as well it goes on to say in verse 17 the Lord will bring on you and on your people Judah and on your ancestral house something terrible something not seen for centuries the king of Assyria himself verse 17 end of verse 17 yes it's true that this sign will be a sign of the end of your enemies as God has promised in verses 4-9 but that doesn't mean your safety and security either because Assyria will follow on behind and take up and clean up Judah historically speaking they devastated the land they didn't defeat Jerusalem though this is a rebuke you see for false trust

Ahaz had placed his trust in Assyria just because the enemies that he's defeated they themselves are defeated doesn't mean that he's placed his trust in the right place because the very one in whom he's placed his trust will turn around and devour him as well and that is always the case with false gods and idolatry isn't it whenever somebody worships a false god or an idol in the end they are drawn into destructive slavery of that idol Assyria that was the idol that was their god that was the one in whom they placed their trust and the result Isaiah says will be you'll be destroyed by the very one in whom you place your trust but that's the same in today's world with the idols of our society those who place their trust and hope in money but find their lives just devoured by greed those who place their faith and trust in fame and commit suicide in Sydney hotels or elsewhere those who place their faith and trust in horoscopes but find their lives enslaved by the ridiculous promises and threats of those these are just implicit what is explicit in satanic worship

I think place your faith and trust in no god or the anti-god and death in the end is its result any god that's not the real god consumes and devours and is a burden too great to bear the result of this false trust of king Ahaz is described in more detail in the last few paragraphs on that day god will summon both Egypt and Assyria to be the enemies and come in like swarms of flies and bees to devour the land on that day the Lord will shave with a razor metaphorically speaking stripping away from Judah all its honour and glory humiliating it in the sight of the world on that day verse 21 there may be a sign of hope life will be hard but yes there will be a little remnant who lives on but on that day verse 23 all the cultivated part of the land the great vines of Israel that are worth so much money will be stripped bare and just become a wilderness area for animals the sign you see is a two-edged sign for those without faith like the king

[28 : 19] King Ahaz god with us equals destruction but for those with faith who place their trust in the god of the bible god with us is salvation and hope this sign exposes the folly of worldly wisdom and in its place invites godly wisdom it shows that safety and strength come not from political alliances or military muscle but from faith and trust in the god of the bible this sign points to a greater reality the child that would be born soon in Isaiah's day will in the end point beyond itself to the greater reality probably the expectations of this child were pinned on king Hezekiah a great king at the end of the century just 20 or 30 years later but even the great king

Hezekiah we find later in the book of Isaiah as we'll see in a couple of months time failed and all the hopes pinned on him came to naught but he himself looked beyond himself to the one who would perfectly fulfill these words the greater reality the royal king the one who Matthew the gospel writer told us in the second reading today fulfills these words to perfection the real prince of peace the real royal child the real God with us and yes in a two edged way for there were plenty who rejected him and found therefore God's judgment but for those who place their faith and trust in him that royal child they found their eternal salvation the failure of Israel's kings as Ahaz illustrates leads on inexorably to the king who will be perfect the one born in

Bethlehem whose birth we celebrate next month far beyond what even Isaiah anticipated Jesus fulfills for the world the words of invitation then that Isaiah gave to Ahaz stand for our world and ourselves with respect to Jesus if you do not stand firm in faith in Jesus God with us you shall not stand at all at all Hiromas to want to put into anotherief