

God's vineyard should produce Godly fruit

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[0 : 00] And let me pray for us as we come to Isaiah chapter 5. Heavenly Father, we thank you that you have spoken to us by your spirit and in your words.

And so we pray, Lord, that however hard this may be to hear, you would speak to us today. We want, Lord, to be those who live our lives for you, whose lives reflect your goodness and your glory. So do your work in us this morning, we pray in Jesus' name. Amen. So Isaiah chapter 5, if you've closed your Bibles, would be helpful, I think, to have that open for you.

Last Sunday, we began our short series on Isaiah with a bit of an overview of the book. And then we heard God's verdict on his people. They were, Isaiah told them, a rebellious nation, a people who had turned their back on God and were now reaping the harvest of their choices.

Interestingly, though, while they had forsaken God, they hadn't given up on church. You think the two would go together automatically, wouldn't you? But it's not the case. Their Sabbath gatherings and festivals carried on just like they did before.

[1 : 15] They still brought all the proper sacrifices, but it was a dead religion. Their lives were disconnected from their hearts. And yet in the last verses we heard last week, the Lord graciously offered forgiveness and cleansing to those who would repent and turn to him.

Though your sins be as scarlet, he said, they shall be as white as snow. What a wonderful offer. But the people would not come. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are on a similar theme.

God's judgment is declared. But at the same time, hope is offered and salvation is promised. But what was the response of the people? Well, by and large, they simply carried on as they had before.

I wonder how you would deal with such a response. If you're a salesperson on commission, you would probably pack up your bags and move someone else, wouldn't you? Because obviously the people aren't buying.

But remember who these people are. These are God's people. They are God's children. The children he called and saved and brought up. The ones he loved and cherished.

[2 : 25] Just as if our children go astray, we don't give up on them. We still love them. We longed for them to come back. The Jews, after all, are the ones through whom God's great plan of salvation for the world would come about.

And so again and again, God sent prophets like Isaiah with the same kind of message. Delivered in slightly different ways. In the hope that it might penetrate their hard hearts and lead them to repentance, salvation and blessing.

That's what we've got in chapter 5. So picture the scene. The people are gathered in the city. Isaiah comes and stands in the middle of them. Maybe he stands on a podium. Maybe on a wall.

And he begins to sing a song about a vineyard. People knew about vineyards. The country was dotted with them. So maybe they stopped and listened. My loved one had a vineyard on a fertile hillside.

I don't know whether that was the tune. But he belted it out. The people begin to listen. And the song begins beautifully. It tells of a vineyard where the soil was perfect.

[3 : 34] The location, ideal. Everything needed to make this vineyard truly fruitful was done. The vines were the best you could buy. The land was dug and cleared of stones.

There was a watchtower there to protect it from, I guess, enemies or wild animals. A wine press was even dug in the ground so the grapes could be crushed while they were perfectly fresh.

There's a question in the second part of the song. The listeners were asked, what else could the owner of the vineyard possibly have done to get a good harvest? And the answer is rhetorical, but it's there, isn't it?

Nothing. You have done everything possible. And yet, despite this, verse 2 tells us, the vineyard yielded only bad fruits. Literally, the word in Hebrew is it yielded stink fruit.

There is a fruit like that, isn't there? It's called stink fruit. You cut it open and the stench is utterly appalling. Might look good on the outside, but you really don't want to be near it when it's undone.

[4 : 41] That's what the fruitfulness of God's people is like. What was the vineyard owner to do now? Despite all the time and trouble and care he'd taken with it, the vineyard was obviously useless.

When Judy and I moved into our vicarage in Steepmarge, the whole of the vegetable plot was overgrown. It hadn't been used for about three years. And it was about this high, about four feet high of brambles.

Thick brambles. Now, you could trim them off from the top and it looked good, but of course that wasn't good enough. So over six months or so, I and a gardener we had dug it and re-dug it down to about two feet to get every one of those evil roots taken out.

But here, the situation is far worse, isn't it? The problem isn't just a few endemic weeds. Everything is wrong. The land and the vine have been poisoned. So what will the owner do?

Well, verses five and six tell us. I will take away its hedge and it will be destroyed. I will break down its wall and it will be trampled. I will make it a wasteland. Neither pruned nor cultivated.

[5 : 49] Briars and thorns will grow there. I will command the clouds not to rain on it. That last line gives a clue, doesn't it, to who the owner of the vineyard is.

Only God controls the rain. And then comes the sting in the tail. The vineyard of the Lord Almighty is the nation of Israel and the people of Judah are the vines he delighted in.

See, this isn't just a folk song about the wonder of vines and the wonderful taste of good wine. It was a judgment on God's people who, despite all that God had done for them, were living lives that stank of sin.

God's people should have been doing justice, but instead the country was full of violence and wrong. Their lives should have reflected God's righteousness and holiness, but instead the weak and the poor are marginalized and were crying out in distress.

And remember, Isaiah is not speaking to a pagan nation who didn't know better. He's not talking to the Babylonians or Egyptians or the city of Nineveh when Jonah was sent. He's talking here to God's people who were living in God's land, supposedly under God's law, with God's presence in their midst.

[7 : 06] They had everything they needed to be fruitful, to live righteous, holy lives. And yet there was nothing to delight God here at all. Across the rest of the chapter, Isaiah carries on the crop and harvest analogy further.

He highlights six wrong things that God's people have been doing or sowing, if you like, and the harvest they are going to reap as a result. In a moment, we'll think very briefly through each of those six.

But before we get to that, I want to make sure we see the link between this passage and our situation today, between God's people then and us, God's people now.

And by that I mean the church in our nation, especially the Church of England, of which we are a part, and maybe our parish and those of us in these walls this morning. Because when we read God's condemnation of his Old Testament people in passages like this, what we're supposed to do is to say, OK, Lord, what are you saying to us?

That's what we do when we read the New Testament, isn't it? When we read of Jesus using parables about fields and vineyards, denouncing the religious people of his day, we don't say, oh, that's just for those people then.

[8 : 23] We stop and say, OK, Lord, what are you saying to me? What are you saying to us? Now, the church is no longer a nation state, living in the Middle East somewhere, but like God's Old Testament people, we are called, both individually and corporately, to be the aroma of Christ to the lost, to be salt and light in our dark and decaying world.

And using the analogy here and from Jesus, we are called to be fruitful vines, producing the fruit of the Holy Spirit, love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control.

Because when we are producing fruit like that in our lives, we will shine like Jesus and speak of Jesus and people will want to know Jesus. Of course, when we are not obedient people, we won't

be fruitful people.

And if we're not producing godly fruit, people will not see Jesus in us and they will not want to follow him. I wonder if that's why the church in the UK is at such a low ebb.

Like the people here, we've turned away from God's commands. We're no longer the aroma of Jesus to our world. You can tell me what you think over coffee. But as always, we must start with our own hearts.

[9 : 50] Can't start by asking God to sort out those people over there. We need to ask him to search us, to reveal any wicked ways in us, to lead us in the ways everlasting.

So keep those things in mind as we look at these six woes that point to six different crops. Are any of these growing in our own fields?

Well, verse 8 seems to be about greed. The rich, like the foolish man in Jesus' parable who builds bigger, bigger barns, seem to be wanting more and more land so they can feel absolutely secure. But as Isaiah tells them, there is no security in that. Such greed, Isaiah says, ends in disaster in empty houses, crumbling estates, unfruitful land.

Investing solely in the things of this world brings a terrible return in the end. Is that a challenge to where we are placing our hope and security? Verses 9 and 10 shine a light on those who live for pleasure.

[10 : 53] The picture here is of people who party hard, who get up in the morning to have a drink and stay up late so they can carry on drinking. But there are lots of different ways of living pleasure-filled lives.

In the 60s it was sex, drugs and rock and roll. In the 80s and 90s it was shop until you drop. Maybe today it's turn on, log in and switch off.

As people spend their time amusing themselves to death on social media. Doesn't need to be any of those things though. Can be spending all our time and our focus on energy on sport or gardening or friends and family.

Anything that shows that whilst we are enjoying God's good gifts, we don't want anything to do with God's. He's kept at arm's length. The people here gave little thought to God who gave them these gifts and made no attempt to use those gifts rightly.

Do we dip into that kind of life, I wonder? Maybe not with the excesses suggested here. But I wonder if we sometimes run after worldly pleasures to dull the ache of the world.

[12 : 02] But Isaiah's warning is that those who reject God and pursue a pleasure-filled lifestyle will one day find that the party is ultimately over. Living solely for pleasure leads to the grave.

Where hunger is never satisfied nor thirsts quench. Well there's a lot of desolation in these early verses, isn't there? Powerful structures, empires come crashing down.

And yet Isaiah declares that when the prophesied ruin comes, people will look at God's judgments and say, you know what, that is absolutely right.

It was richly deserved. I wonder too though if there is a glimpse of hope in these verses. Verse 17, the country may be devastated and yet there are still some sheep who gaze safely in the ruins. Is that a hint towards the remnant who will be saved? By the good shepherd? Maybe. But in this chapter Isaiah's got more to say.

[13 : 11] In the first two woes, if they're about the abuse of the material benefits of wealth and plenty, the last four are about the failure of God's people to keep their moral and spiritual obligations.

So in verses 18 and 19 we find the religious sceptics. Those who taunt God and laugh at any suggestion that he might actually do anything.

But their attitudes become a snare to themselves and to those who listen to them. That's the image of drawing along sin with ropes and cords. This doubting and mocking puts them and others in bondage.

Are we tempted to doubt God ourselves? Or maybe to see God as so distant, so far away and unobserved, that he's not ever going to do anything anymore?

Well, that isn't the God of the Bible. He is always true to his words. In verse 20 we find those who reverse God's commands, who call good evil and evil good.

[14 : 16] That might be through challenging public morals or church teaching or encouraging people to adopt a personal morality where they simply do whatever feels right to them. Well, disaster lies this way, for God's commands are as unchanging as he is himself.

Are we tempted to adopt the morals of the world rather than standing on the solid rock of the scriptures? See, when we live like that, we leave true faith behind.

It's very easy to end up with a dry religion that brings chains instead of the life and hope that Jesus offers. In verse 21, the self-reliant are singled out, not for working hard and caring for themselves and their families, that's a positive thing, but for making their own wisdom superior to God's.

I guess maybe you've met someone like that, who seems to have a special knowledge and who just looks down on those people who don't see the world as they do. Oh yes, I used to think like that, but now I've seen the light.

You poor thing, you. Pride always leads to a fall though, doesn't it? There are people in the church like this too, so might that describe us? Proud, conceited.

[15 : 34] The last woe in verses 22 to 23 speaks of a society that venerates not the good and the righteous, but those whose talents are far less noble.

As a result, power ends up in the wrong hands, truth gets corrupted, justice gets perverted. Think of some of the world leaders we've seen in recent decades.

I wonder if their election might actually be linked to an electorate, that's us, who is more interested in show than substance, in gimmicks more than character.

So who are our heroes? And how are our lives and our children's lives affected by turning a blind eye to the weaknesses and failures of those people we do admire?

Well, Isaiah's description gives us a picture of a society that is rotten from top to bottom. It's a vineyard that is yielding a bad crop of rotten, stinking grapes.

[16 : 39] The roots are rotting in the ground. The flowers, if any, are produced are dry and dusty. There is no health left in this plant at all. And when wickedness amongst God's people reaches this kind of level, well, there is no other option than a complete clear out.

God and his word have been rejected. Yet God's word of judgment will stand. And such is the power and devastation of God's judgment that in verse 25, Isaiah likens it to an earthquake that shatters everything.

And that's what happens. For the Jews living in Judah and Jerusalem in Isaiah's day, the full force of God's judgment would come in the form of the might of the Babylonian army.

That's what's being described here in verses 26 to 30. But whereas God's people might have been drunk and sleepy, the enemy coming to their doors, these pagan barbarians come in swiftly, well-dressed for war and destruction.

They are fearless and fearsome, like whirlwinds. They are like the fiercest lions, like a stormy sea that sweeps away all in its path. And of course, there are no defences that can stand against that kind of attack, are there?

[17 : 56] When God's people rejected God and his word, he removed his protection over his vineyard. It's as if God says to them, you didn't want me, well, therefore you won't have me.

You won't have me to protect you or bless you. You wanted your own way. You ignored my commands. You followed the ways of the nations around you. Well, now you will reap the harvest you have sown.

The passage ends in gloom, doesn't it? Without any sense of hope. Verse 30, If you read two kings and read about the fall of Jerusalem, that is how it was.

The nation was overwhelmed. The city destroyed. Every section of society felt the brunt of God's judgment. From the ruling elites and religious leaders to the laborers and the poorest people, they all endured a cataclysmic judgment and the city was left desolate and uninhabited for 70 years.

Wow. Well, over the last decades, the Christian witness in our own nation has dimmed too, hasn't it?

[19 : 14] As God's word has been relegated and rejected from its rightful place, the church has grown weak and worldly and quiet. In some places, the deep corruption has led to child abuse scandals and abuses of power.

It's no wonder the church is shrinking. It's no wonder why over the last 10 years alone, 2,000 churches have closed across the UK. 2,000.

Many of those in our cities. Cities which are actually growing all the time. And yet the churches are shrinking and closing. Recently, though, and maybe you've read this in your newspapers today, if you get one, there have been signs of hope and growth in the UK.

There have been numerous reports spoken about a growing hunger amongst younger people, in particular seeking for lasting truth and an enduring hope. That is great news.

But they will only find it if God's people are increasingly Christ-like rather than worldly. They'll only come if we as God's people in this place are producing godly fruit that smells of Jesus, that has the aroma of real life, not the stink fruit that reeks of death.

[20 : 32] So what about us here in Newton-Adort? What's the witness of our churches? Are we living lives that are fruitful, that carry the aroma of Jesus?

Are we taking his light and light out like the salt and light Jesus speaks of? Or do we actually just live just like our neighbours? Do we really believe what we declare in our creeds, as we will in a few moments' time?

Or have we been left with the ashes of a true religion and just a shadow of the real Jesus? You see, if we are in our day, if we are not faithful and fruitful, there will be no future for the church in this town.

And in 50 years' time, this place will be another solicitor's office, or God forbid, a mosque or a Mormon tabernacle. And whilst we may be secure in heaven because the Lord holds on to those who are his, the baton will not have been passed on to the next generation.

And our fruit will not last. But of course, the cataclysm Isaiah speaks of here does not need to be the final word, does it?

[21 : 48] Every single time Isaiah preached this message, there was an opportunity for repentance and change. Because our God is a God who delights to forgive and restore and cleanse. Ancient Judah may have had a hard heart, but what about us here in St Paul's this morning?

What about the church across New and Abbott in England? See, if we turn to the Lord, wholeheartedly coming back to him again, we will find that the Lord is a God of second and third and fourth and fifth chances, whose mercy never runs out.

We'll find that he is a God who seeks the prodigal, who rescues the drowning, who loves his church, and who loves his people with a love that is far deeper and stronger that we can ever grasp.

So look at that last verse once more. Cast your mind back to another day of darkness and distress. To another day when the sun was darkened by clouds.

We marked that a few weeks ago, didn't we? Good Friday. A day when God's full wrath and judgment fell, not on his people, but on his son.

[22 : 59] Jesus, that you and I might be forgiven and have eternal life. Next Sunday we'll hear about Isaiah's call to be a light to the people, a messenger, a prophet.

But he could not accept that call until his hands had been washed clean. But he was washed, he was cleansed, he was forgiven, and with unclean hands and hearts that were made new, he went out with the good news of Jesus.

That's God's offer for us too. Having been made new, we can be made fruitful, ready to take the good news out to our town. So where is God probing us today?

Which parts of our lives come to mind as we reflect on God's words to his Old Testament people?

Where does God want us to repent? And to change so that we can be Jesus fruitful?

A few moments of quiet. And then we'll come to our confession together and be reminded of God's pardon and cleansing for all who ask.

[24 : 12] Amen.