

God's Grand Vision: Transformed people

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[0 : 01] Good morning everyone. Let's bow our heads. I'm going to pray. Heavenly Father, we pray that as we come to your word now and as I speak from it, that you would speak to us by your spirit, that you would grow us in Christ to your glory.

And we pray this in Jesus' name. Amen. Our Archbishop Peter Jensen spoke to us, or spoke with a few of us the other day at clergy conference, at Northern Region Clogy Conference, and he was talking about conversion to Christ and especially how it's something that begins with God himself. It's not just something we do for ourself. It's the regenerating work of the spirit of God in us that brings us to Christ. And then he gave us a really sober warning, born of experience. He said that at every level of church life, people engage in unregenerate behaviour, that is destructive to our life as the people of God, but it is also damaging to our witness to Christ in the world.

And global mission, how people outside see us, is undermined by unregenerate behaviour amongst us. And he said that churches and church organisations and Christian schools are always tempted to put people into leadership because of need.

[1 : 25] We need to fill a position. We need somebody for the job, so we put somebody in as treasurer because they work with finance. We put somebody into the parish council because they're a leader in the business world.

And when we put qualifications and experience ahead of Christian faith, we're actually ahead for disaster. And he said an example would be that church schools that have lowered their expectations of faith, or Christian faith in their teachers, and have pursued academic excellence, which is always the pressure from parents, now turn out well-educated unbelievers. Generalisation. I found it to be true in a place or two too. His words are actually born of bitter experience.

He demanded the licence of one of my friends in ministry who was found to have had a number of sexual affairs with people in parishes that he worked in. His early days as archbishop were sometimes miserable.

Numbers of times he took strong action to remove people from ministry. They were people whose behaviour had caused the name of Christ to be dragged through the mud, and some of those people still hate him.

[2 : 44] My first year in one of my parishes saw similar things. I had a warden who thought I was just... She was female, but she just thought I was the nicest man in the world for ten months.

And then I think I lovingly spoke to her. She doesn't think so, but I lovingly spoke to her about a relationship that seemed to be developing with one of our parish counsellors.

And it later intruded into their marriage, her marriage. It later became adultery. I lost a warden. I lost a parish counsellor. And I lost a synod rep because of their immorality.

Three different people. I've watched another church, which was a huge supporter of missions, known all over the place for their good works and watched them self-destruct because of immorality amongst the people of God.

And that church can no longer afford to support a minister. So we and the world out there often focuses on things like the forgiveness and the mercy that is to be found in Christ, which is real.

[3 : 57] But we must not underestimate the devastating effects of sin amongst God's people and God's anger with it. And there is a need for strong leadership to deal with it.

So the Bible passage before us this morning, it's the Isaiah passage. It's Isaiah chapter 56, beginning at verse 9 and following through at the end of chapter 57. It'd be great if you had your Bibles open.

But it is a shattering description of the people of God. And Isaiah brings the word of God to the people of God and sin and wickedness seem to reign and it starts from the top down.

It begins with the leaders. And so you read, Come all you beasts of the field, come and devour all you beasts of the forest. Israel's watchmen are blind, they all lack knowledge, they are mute dogs, they cannot bark, they lie around and dream, they love to sleep.

They are dogs with mighty appetites, they never have enough, they are shepherds who lack understanding, they all turn to their own way, each seeks his own gain.

[5 : 16] Come, each one cries, let me get wine, let us drink our fill of beer, and tomorrow will be like today, or even better. And so what he's doing, he's issuing an invitation to the beasts of the field, the beasts of the forest, to come in amongst the people of God, rip, tear, devour.

They're invited to bring destruction as God's judgment. And he castigates the failure of leadership. The watchmen and the shepherds, who are nearly always prophets in the Old Testament, have failed in their duty of care.

They're responsible to live under God's law and call the people of God to as well. And he describes them as blind, as ignorant, as mute. All the faculties that they need to be able to do their work have been disabled by sin.

And so they can't see, so they're in no position to look out for trouble. They're ignorant, they lack knowledge, they can't even begin to teach what they should be teaching, they can no longer even discern right from wrong, and seemingly don't care.

And they're mute. They don't even use their voices to warn people. And so rather than looking after the interests of the people of God, they're sitting in the background, drinking, in the backyard, drinking their beer and having a great old time on the wine and looking after themselves.

[6 : 46] And he says, they've got insatiable appetites for seeking their own gain. They are gluttons and drunkards focused on what they can get out of life. And they live oblivious to the work that God has appointed them to do.

And they are like the rich fool in Luke chapter 12. They have settled back. They are taking life easy. They do not live with any fear of God.

They have no concern at all that one night he will demand their life. And so Isaiah begins with the leadership because they have failed to teach and obey the word of God and as a result, God's people have descended into great wickedness.

I can't read this without reflecting on my own leadership amongst God's people and I would ask you that if you have leadership in a small group or other ministry in this church or in other places to reflect on it for yourself.

Do we have courage to confront sin in our midst? Do we excuse brothers and sisters for inappropriate behaviour or in their speech and say, well, they've always been like that?

[8 : 15] Or do I care more about how people see me and the importance of my role? Do I live the acknowledgement of others? Do I live on the privileges and esteem that leadership brings without taking the responsibilities that it involves?

See, watchmen and shepherds are called by the Lord Jesus to sacrificial service. We are servants of Christ.

We are not employees of the people of God. We are called to have humble hearts which are submissive to Christ and which seek his glory. And Isaiah is caustic in his critique of the wickedness of the leaders.

But then he moves on to describe the wickedness which reigns amongst the people of God. So chapter 57, verse 3. But you, come here, you sons of a sorceress, you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes, whom are you mocking?

At whom do you sneer and stick out your tongue? Are you not a brood of rebels, the offspring of liars? You burn with lust under the oaks and under every spreading tree.

[9 : 34] You sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags. The idols among the smooth stones of the ravines are your portion. They, they are your lot.

Yes, to them you have poured out drink offerings and offered grain offerings in the light of these things. Should I relent? You have made your bed on a high and lofty hill and there you want to offer up your sacrifices.

Behind your doors and your doorposts you have put your pagan symbols. Forsaking me, you uncovered your bed. You climbed into it and opened it wide. You made a pact with those whose

beds you love and you looked on their nakedness.

You went to Moloch with olive oil and you increased your perfumes. You sent your ambassadors far away. You descended to the grave itself. Not a pretty picture.

God's people described as sons of a sorceress you offspring of adulterers and prostitutes could have used a more colloquial way of speaking about them. But their mocking, verse 4, is a mocking of God sticking their tongue out at him.

[10 : 40] What are you going to do about it? And they have done it. We've seen the last few weeks. They have done it by pursuing other gods. They've taken on the ways of worship of the surrounding nations.

They've made political treaties. They've forgotten the Lord God. One of the other gods is named Moloch in verse 9. Another is hinted at by the practices. So in verse 7, beds on high hills where you offered sacrifices.

Or verse 5, lust under the oaks and spreading trees. So in that society, Baal and his female counterpart Ashtaroth were widely worshipped in this farming society.

And so an annual crop was their livelihood. It was their life. It was their well-being. It was their wealth. It was their salvation. Everything was dependent upon the success of the crop.

And so part of the town festival might involve the priest of Baal having sex in public with a young woman as part of the worship aimed at securing Baal's favour and blessing.

[11 : 41] And you go through this passage and you see there's lots of sexual overtones into this worship in verses 8 and 9. The pagan symbols are very likely of male sex organs associated with fertility.

Lots of those have been found by archaeologists. And Isaiah is quite graphic speaking about the uncovered bed and the pact that you have made with others that you love. You look on their nakedness.

It's a metaphorical picture. The people of God have been prostituting themselves to other gods. But it's also an actual picture because the worship of these gods opens them up to rampant immorality. Moloch worship is horrifically wicked. Verse 5 You sacrifice your children in the ravines and under the overhanging crags.

You slip out of town with the unwanted child and you murder them in a quiet place where people cannot see down in the riverbed under a crag near the smooth stones as you seek well-being and protection from Moloch for yourself.

[13 : 08] Sort of religion and ways of worship seem a long way removed from reality for most of us.

Increasingly not true because many people in our church family now come from cultures very different from a western one. And Men's Breakfast last Saturday T.S. Lim spoke about or showed us pictures of his family's clan house in Malaysia and explained that it was the place where they had their family idols and where the family would go to worship the ancestors.

He said the Lim family in Malaysia is a bit like the Jones family in Australia a really common name everybody goes there. We don't have one not in that sort of way we don't build idols and we don't build temples to stuff them in and worship them at.

We've lived many of us have lived in the west we have a so-called scientific understanding of the world based on cause and effect we tend towards atheism and many believe in a world which doesn't need any sort of God.

These practices are below us and we become God. The world revolves around us and everything is to our pleasure we are at the centre of the world and we create our own security and so we work hard to secure things like our wealth and our future.

[14 : 45] Education's of very high value because it's a mechanism for climbing above our parents' situation in life. So grandparents and parents invest a lot in their children because we want them to rise above us.

It's a way of putting ourselves ahead of other people and over other people. One of our older people said to us at a small group the other night that they notice amongst their peers older people that you see this sort of control even to the end of their lives that people in nursing homes and aged care some of them are very concerned about how their life will end and they want to have control over how their life will end.

We wouldn't be so crass would we as to have rampant immorality in public places and yet I turn on my television and I cannot turn the channel without people reenacting sex of all kinds in front of me

and I am drawn by it and so it does it occurs in public everywhere and Moloch is not far from us either we go to a quiet place to destroy unwanted children I went to the website of one of our local hospitals recently looking for a phone number to ring one of our elderly patients patients and I was confronted on that website by the links to the abortion ad to the abortion website biggest business in Sydney amongst them it was boasting and I went there and that website told me that they treat women from 13 to 50 and that the average age of patients is not a teenager but it's 28 and they massage their language they're honest they're forthright they say we carry out abortions terminations but they don't abort babies in their language they just remove unwanted tissue and evacuate it from a woman's body that's the language that's used not designed to be a guilt trip I know in speaking to any of our congregations that numbers of us may have been impacted in some way by abortion and if that is you then a different kind of conversation needs to be had but the point that I'm making is that we can look back on these so called unsophisticated societies 2700 years ago and not identify with the wickedness of their idolatry their worship led them to rampant immorality and great wickedness in the killing of their children but we have the outcomes of idol worship all around us and the question becomes what is it that we worship that leads us to be a society where immorality is rampant and where thousands and thousands of children's lives are ended every year and it's not just out there it's in here as well and so

Isaiah paints a picture of great darkness and evil which has come over the people of God it seems like evil reigns the wicked are thriving and godly people go to the grave and I think that's what verses 1 and 2 are about the righteous perish and no one ponders it in his heart devout men are taken away and no one understands that the righteous are taken away to be spared from evil those who walk uprightly enter into peace they find rest as they lie in death so godly people die and no one cares and yet it says here God takes his own people out righteous people don't have a very high profile in this sort of society they're not movers and shakers they go to their graves unnoticed and without a thought but Isaiah says they're taken away to be spared from evil in death they find peace and rest it's like the hope of a

[19:47] New Testament believer expressed in the Old Testament so you wouldn't a Christian person should not dare to say to somebody who didn't trust in Christ that death is peace the Bible makes it very clear that death comes after judgment or judgment comes after death and in 1 Thessalonians chapter 4 Paul's answering the question what happens to believers who die before Christ returns and he answers them with deep reassurance brothers we do not want you to be ignorant about those who fall asleep or to grieve like the rest of men who have no hope we believe that Jesus died and rose again and so we believe that God will bring with Jesus those who have fallen asleep in him the same reassurance in the New Testament is here in Isaiah 700 years before Christ for the person safe in Christ death is not the end it's regarded as sleep it's in rest it's an escape from having to live with the wickedness of the world including its impact on us it's a great hope but the other way out of this mess begins to be revealed in verse 13 the person who makes me his refuge will inherit the land and possess my holy mountain the wicked person is invited to find safety and protection with

God hear that the wicked person is invited to find safety and protection with God absolutely unbelievable and true and so if you are overwhelmed by your own sin and failures this is for you God asserts himself verse 15 he says this is what the high and holy one says he who lives forever whose name is holy I live in a high and holy place but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite see the picture here is wickedness seems to reign and it might not be where all the action is it might seem like this is the place where all the action is but the eternal God of the universe speaks from his everlasting throne and he says I reign I am king and whether you believe it or not

I be true and notice what God doesn't say to us as we come to him he doesn't say pull up your socks get your act together overcome your sin he speaks to the person who makes him their refuge and he says not only does God reign on his glorious throne in heaven he is also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lonely and revive the heart of the contrite God is near as a passage I often read to people in distress and sometimes it is in distress over their own sin and failure so you minister to a person differently according to how they present themselves to you so if somebody comes forward saying there's nothing wrong with all this stuff I'm doing that's a very different perspective from the person who comes forward and done and the evil that is in my heart what is going to come of me and psalm chapter 9 verse 7 says the

Lord reigns forever and he has established his throne for judgment he will judge the world in righteousness and he will govern the peoples with justice the Lord is a refuge for the oppressed a stronghold in times of trouble and those who know your name will trust in you for you Lord have never forsaken those who seek you God is king and he is also very near to those who are humble enough to make him their refuge and over and over again he invites us to bring our failures and our brokenness to him without pretense this is the other conversation I mentioned a minute ago if your life is damaged by immorality or your conscience is torn through the impact of an abortion or whatever it is that weighs upon your soul Christ the king invites you to make him your refuge God's men and women are deeply aware of sin and they struggle with it and it is with broken hearts and dependent spirits that we come to God and we throw ourselves on his mercy one of the commentators I read as I prepared this message says God comforts mourners and those who won't weep won't be comforted so if you have been tainted by the immorality of this world as I have and if you have participated in Moloch and been involved in the destruction of unborn children or whatever it is that you have done there is this extraordinary invitation to throw ourselves on God's mercy and he doesn't say get out of my sight

[25 : 47] I don't ever want to see you again he invites us to bring our sin and failure to the one who was pierced for our transgressions crushed for our iniquities the one on whom the Lord laid the iniquity of us all four chapters before Isaiah 53 the servant who makes these things possible invites us to bring our sin and wickedness to the cross of the Lord Jesus Christ the great invitational words of the Lord Jesus come to me all you who are weary and burdened and I will give you rest take my yoke upon you and learn from me for I am gentle and humble in heart and you will find rest for your souls for my yoke is easy and my burden is light in the sermon on the mount Jesus says blessed are those who mourn for they will be comforted he's not speaking merely about bereavement he is speaking about being deeply grieved by our own sin and brokenness we are the tax collector in the temple of God in Luke 18 who cannot even raise his eyes to heaven and beats his breast and says God have mercy on me the sinner see in our month of global mission awareness see that God has given us the most magnificently hopeful message to shout to the world he is the great and magnificent creator God of the universe he has come near through his son the Lord

Jesus Christ he has come near to anyone who would make him their refuge he is a magnificent God and he says I live in a high and holy place but also with him who is contrite and lowly in spirit to revive the spirit of the lowly and to revive the heart of the contrite Amen