

Readings:

Isaiah 9: 1-4

1 Corinthians 1: 10-18

Matthew 4: 12-23

Who's in control of your life?

'This is the Word of the Lord'. Emphatically *it is!* But why do we take any notice of words spoken thousands of years ago to people living in a very different time and place from ours? Why should we take any notice? What is the relevance to us of God's word – assuming we recognise it as such? What is the relevance to us of God's word to them? Every week we read three readings from the Bible, and we thank God for the gift of his word. God's word is important, something to be treasured, pondered, prayed about, considered carefully, and made part of our everyday lives. But surely it's old-fashioned, out-dated, not relevant to us – it comes from a time and place and a people who have nothing in common with us. I don't agree – God's word is important, even life-giving.

And I don't believe it's not relevant to us. The people who heard the word of God through the prophet Isaiah in our first reading were not so very different from us. Isaiah was prophesying in the 8th century before Jesus, so obviously the people were different in some ways – they couldn't have dreamed of air travel, let alone space travel, the internet, mobile phones, cars and the rest. They lived simpler lives but in many ways they were just like us. Human nature – what it means to be a human being – hasn't changed much, if at all.

Life has always been plagued by three main sources of sin – greed, idolatry and selfishness. In biblical times people were less concerned about their individual rights, but the rights of the family and the tribe were all important, much more so than to us today. But people have never been immune to the temptation to greed – wanting more than your fair share. And idolatry – putting something other than God in God's rightful place, making something other than God the most important thing in your life. As well as greed and idolatry modern life is beset by the sin of individualism – I want what's mine by rights. It's all about rights and very little about responsibility.

Much of the bible is about the mess people have got into by falling into these three traps. The Bible tells us what God says about it all, and more than that – what he has done about it. And of course, what he has done is to come and share our earthly life in the person of Jesus of Nazareth, the incarnate Son of God – God's living word to us, and through his cross and resurrection, to overcome all that is evil and make it possible for us to share the life that God offers us. And if we didn't have the bible how would we know any of this? That is why I believe it is so important to read it, to try to understand it, and to see how it relates to us in our lives today. Well, that's one of the jobs of the preacher, so I'd better try and make sense of today's readings.

Isaiah's words relate to a time in the 8th century before Jesus, when there had been an invasion in the north of the country by the Assyrians from the east. Fortunately for us we don't know what an invasion by a foreign power would be like. It hasn't happened in this country on a large scale since the Norman Conquest in the 11th century. Hitler planned to invade but was never able to put his plan into action. What would have happened? Would we be alive if he had? We can't imagine what it must be like to live somewhere that gets overrun by enemy forces. We see enough pictures on our TVs but I think unless you've actually lived through it you can only imagine the horror and the terror. So Isaiah is writing about a very dark time in Israel's history, a time that has now past and better

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times are coming. It will be like stepping out of the darkness into the light. It is a time of hope and promise, although no hint is given of the time of the actual fulfilment.

We are living in uncertain, and you could say somewhat dark times. There seem to be many evil forces at work in the world. We don't always feel in control of our own destiny, and we get anxious about what the future may hold. Like the Psalmist in Ps. 77 we begin to wonder if God has forgotten us, or changed his mind about caring for his people. We wonder if he realises what we are going through. Or perhaps we just give up on God and think it was all a delusion. There isn't a God who cares.

Our gospel reading sheds a different light on what can happen in a dark and fearful world. John the Baptist had been preparing the way for Jesus – telling people to turn back to God and be ready for the coming of the promised Messiah. But the forces of darkness in the person of Herod the king had had John thrown into prison, from where it was unlikely that he would emerge alive. His ministry was at an end and Jesus saw that the time had come for him to act, and begin his own ministry. Matthew sees this as a replaying of the movement from dark to light that Isaiah wrote about, and he quotes the same words that we heard in our first reading.

In Jesus' time the dark forces were the occupying Romans as well as wicked kings like Herod. The people were being badly led by the spiritual leaders of the country and so spiritually as well as politically the people were in a dark place. Many of them were very poor. Life was hard and full of uncertainties. The beginning of Jesus' ministry was like the dawning of a bright new day. The light of God's love and the coming of the Kingdom were there in Jesus. He took up the same battle cry as John had used to awaken people's awareness of God's coming among them – 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near.'

Jesus began his ministry – travelling around the region of Galilee – preaching, teaching, healing people. Word about him spread quickly and people saw that something special was happening, something they couldn't explain or understand but they could see it was good. It is within this context that Jesus calls Simon, later called Peter, and Andrew to follow him. James and John, too left their jobs and followed Jesus. Were they just young men seeking adventure? It must have dawned on them pretty soon that Jesus was very special, someone with a different take on life, even – someone who made them feel alive. They had seen the light and wanted to be part of it. Most of all they felt drawn to him and they trusted him.

So what about us? Are there dark areas in your life? Are there bad things happening that mean you don't feel in control of what's going on? We all like to feel in control, but sometimes there are things over which we have no control – and then we are uncertain, we get anxious about the future. We forget that God is in control.

We are living in uncertain times – we don't know what will happen with Brexit, will Donald Trump live down to his reputation? Will there be more rail strikes and more travel misery? Job uncertainty and worries about money. So many dark forces. And then there are the more personal worries like health and relationships, worries about other members of our families, and so on.

It often feels that we are helpless to change things and that there is nothing we can do, but just sit back and let it happen. But there is always something we can do – even regarding things like Brexit

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and Donald Trump. We can pray. We can be sure that a huge wave of prayer will surround the start of his presidency from Christians all around the world and especially in the USA – Christians surprised and a bit puzzled about how such a person can be elected to the most powerful position in the western world. But whatever happens people will be praying, and we can add our own prayers to that. And the same applies to Brexit and indeed to all the problems that face our country – problems that are seemingly beyond our control. They are not beyond God's control. That doesn't mean he will fix things to suit us, but we can trust him that in the end, good will prevail, and the Kingdom will come.

There will always be dark forces at work in the world. But we know that in Jesus' death and resurrection they have been overcome, and will not be part of God's kingdom. They are still at work now but will not last for ever. Bad things will happen – Christians are not immune to ill-health, loss of job, or anything else. But we have the promise of Jesus that he will always be with us, and God's promise that in the end all will be well. As Mother Julian writing in the 14th century wrote "All shall be well, and all shall be well and all manner of thing shall be well." God is to be trusted. That is something many of us know from experience. God is in control even if we are not.

If you feel that life is being done to you rather than you living it – if you don't feel in control, then think about what it is that is a dark force in your life. If you can identify it then perhaps you can begin to see if there is something you can do to overcome it. We all need to identify the dark areas of our lives – there is always something, because this side of the kingdom life is not perfect. It's important that we can see what it is that is going wrong, and bring these things before God, and ask him to guide us in what we should do. Maybe you're caught up in a bad situation at work – bullying is happening. What should you do? It's not always straightforward – but with God's guidance the right thing can be done, and it may mean you have to take a risk. It's not always going to be comfortable.

I'm going to challenge you now – to spend a couple of minutes thinking about the areas of darkness in your life. Identify one area of darkness in your life and think what you might do about it. You've all been given a piece of paper as you came in and there are pens if you don't have one. I'm asking you to write on that piece of paper what it is in your life that is an area of darkness. Fold it over – there's no need for anyone else to see it, and I promise you I won't read them. Place it in the basket when it comes round, and we will offer them all to God, and pray that in the coming days he will guide you as to what you should do about it. And in doing that perhaps some more light will come into your life.

Remember that the bible reminds us in many places that we are not to be anxious, but to trust in God – the God who can help us feel secure whatever happens. The important thing is that we should let God take control of our lives – not the forces of darkness. In our baptism we turned from darkness to light and we are encouraged to walk in that light all our days. As Paul reminds us in the reading we had today from his letter to the church in Corinth, we have all been baptised into Christ, we all belong to him and he is faithful. To him be the glory. Amen.

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