

One thing about being off work for 10 weeks is that it gives you plenty of time to think, and one of the things I was thinking about the other day was jobs that people do and in particular what would be the worst jobs around – and in this latest international break, I got thinking about the job of being the England football manager.

Now, I'm sure there are lots of good things about that job, but there are also many dreadful things. You may remember some of the awful treatment that the press has given previous holders of this post when the team has been struggling – I remember some dreadful images of the late Graham Taylor merged with a turnip to indicate his poor performance, and the description of Steve McClaren as the wally with the broly when he did the most unreasonable thing of sheltering under an umbrella in the pouring rain during a match.

But the thing that I think is so difficult about this job is that the best you can aim to do is to be as good as one person who in 1966 led England to win the world cup. Ever since Sir Alf Ramsey's triumph, the performance of England teams has been judged against one tournament in the past. It doesn't matter how well the team is playing now, we won the world cup in 1966 and that is what matters. Is that a healthy way to consider how well something is going? Surely, what is important is what is happening now.

Our reading from the book of Isaiah appears to take a similar line, so let's delve into that and see exactly what was going on – and then see how that can relate to us today.

This section of the prophecies of Isaiah consist of God addressing the people of Israel through the prophet whilst they are in exile in Babylon. You may remember that the Israelites had a pretty torrid history told through the Old Testament – and it was very up and down because of their inability to obey God. God made Abraham the father of the Israelites promising that a nation of people would descend from him – through Isaac and Jacob – and they would be given a promised land to live in. But the family's behaviour was not great – certainly not what God would have wanted.

After the 7 year famine, so brilliantly managed by Jacob's son Joseph, Jacob and his young Israelite nation found themselves in Egypt. When the then Pharaoh died his successor was much less friendly towards the Israelites and treated them very badly – indeed like slaves. So God called Moses to lead the people out of Egypt to the promised land – but despite this the people moaned and disobeyed God. But this was the movement which God had promised to his people and was known as the Exodus; it was the story on which the Israelites based their belief that they were God's chosen people – and we will come back to that in a minute.

After the Exodus we then had the whole history of the Kings of Israel and Judah, most of whom led the people away from God – to the extent that God decided that they needed to be banished from their land – and God allowed the great kingdom of Babylon to defeat the Israelites, and the Israelites, or at least the vast majority of them, ended up in captivity, or exile, in Babylon – and that is where we find ourselves in today's reading.

So, with that background, let's go back to our reading. It starts – vs 16,17.

“Thus says the Lord,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,
who brings out chariot and horse, army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick.”

These phrases will immediately say to any Israelite, the Exodus – and in particular the crossing of the Red Sea – or the not quite crossing the red sea when it comes to the Egyptian army.

But then we get this rather unexpected line. v18.

“Do not remember the former things
or consider the things of old.”

As I said before, the Exodus was the defining event in the Israelites history – and is God, through Isaiah really saying – actually forget about all that? The Israelites would have been utterly utterly confused by this. But God continues along these lines – v19.

“I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth do you not perceive it?”

What new thing? Is this new thing going to replace the Exodus. But when we read on it gets even more confusing. 2nd half of 19.

“I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert”

Surely we are back talking about the Exodus again, the event we have been told not to remember – making a way in the wilderness – the Israelites finding their way across the desert; and rivers in the desert – does that not remind us of the Israelites moaning about the lack of water and Moses tapping a rock and out comes the water? But then v20.

“The wild animals will honour me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give waters in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,”

What is this about the wild animals, the jackals and the ostriches? Well, earlier in Isaiah, the prophet had projected a vivid image of chaos; what would happen to the world if people continued to ignore God (34 13-14a).

“Thorns shall grow over its strongholds,
nettles and thistles in its fortresses.
It shall be the haunt of jackals, an abode for ostriches.
Wildcats shall meet with hyenas,
goat-demons shall call to each other.”

So now God is saying that this new thing he is promising is that this wild land will be brought to order, and it will combine with the old, the Exodus. And where is all this confusion leading us? It is leading us to the central message of the whole bible – why he took this dreadful wilderness and mended it: v21.

“to give drink to my chosen people,
the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.”

The reminder that God created the people on this earth to worship Him, to praise him, and this is what the end of the exile in Babylon is all about. It is about God's people, yes, remembering what has happened in the Day: 5th Sunday of Lent

past, but focussing on the present, the worshipping of God – because nothing else matters without our worshipping of God,

our expression of our love of God and receiving His love of us. That's why we are here today, in church, to worship God. Yes, we are in a beautiful old building which houses many memories for all sorts of people – but the reason the building is here today is to help people to worship God today.

Perhaps you now see why I started talking about football, and England winning the world cup 56 years ago, and how, yes let the manager remember that, but he should focus on what the team is capable of doing today. The Israelites could still think about the Exodus, but not if it meant they stopped worshipping God.

And for us, today, yes we need to look after our buildings, and yes, we need to remember and respect the heritage of the church, but if that takes all our time and energy and there is nothing left to talk to people about Jesus, to bring them to know and love Jesus, to teach them how the main reason they are here is to worship God, then I suggest we are doing something wrong. So what can we do about it now, today?

Well, in 2 weeks time we will be celebrating Easter in each of our churches, when we remember how God gave his only Son so that our sins can be forgiven and so we can spend eternity with God.

It is our job, to ensure as many people as possible hear that message – so encourage people to come to one of our services, pray for someone, specifically, who you can see would benefit from hearing that message, pray that they will come, so that we can really see God's Kingdom growing here in this Benefice. What is important is what we do today, and tomorrow, and the next day – don't forget yesterday, but don't let it take over.

Amen