

ISAIAH 43.1-7: DO NOT BE AFRAID! A SERMON FOR NEW YEAR'S EVE

I believe that God has a word for you tonight. A word for you to hold onto as we enter into 2008. So listen carefully to what he has to say.

My text is taken from Isaiah 43.1-7. We have already heard it read from the Good News Bible. Listen to Eugene Peterson's paraphrase:

“Don't be afraid. I've redeemed you. I've called your name. You're mine. When you're in over your head, I'll be there with you. When you're in rough waters, you will not go down. When you're between a rock and a hard place, it won't be a dead end – because I am God, your personal God, the Holy One of Israel, your Saviour. I paid a huge price for you: all of Egypt, with rich Cush and Seba thrown in! That's how much you mean to me! That's how much I love you! I'd sell off the whole world to get you back, trade the creation just for you. So don't be afraid: I am with you”

These words were originally spoken in a time of great trouble. Israel was in a mess - after many years of war, she had been well and truly defeated. The land was in ruins - the cream of the nation had been deported to Babylon.

Not surprisingly people were beginning to question God. They were beginning to doubt his power, if not his very existence. Indeed, many were turning to other gods in the hope of finding a way out of troubles.

At such a time of crisis God through his prophet declared: **"Do not be afraid – I will save you"**. I am not going to let you go to the dogs. In spite of your turning your back on me, I love you too much for that. I will bring you through your present troubles - I will be with you.

And so it was. God did see his people thro their difficulties. He brought the exiles back from Babylon. He restored their fortunes - he was true to his Word.

But this is not just an isolated fact of history - it is a principle whose truth God's people have experienced time and again. For God was not simply with the nation of Israel 6 centuries BC - he continues to stand by his people down through the centuries.

Not surprisingly therefore many preachers have taken these words of old and applied them to their congregations of today.

Tonight I too wish to take these words of assurance and apply them to your life and mine. God says to us all: **"Do not be afraid"**.

As we look ahead to 2008 all of us must wonder what the future has in store

- On the international scene the outlook is far from promising: with Kosovo seeking independence, trouble seems to be brewing again in the Balkans; all being well in 2008 we will withdraw our troops from Iraq, but the odds are that many more British troops will lose their lives in Afghanistan; as for Israel & Palestine, one thing seems certain: the misery of the Palestinians will continue; the same no doubt will be true of Zimbabwe and Darfur. The world outlook is far from happy
- On the national scene the outlook is equally depressing: the housing market is depressed; although interest rates were recently cut by 0.25%, the previous interest hikes are now beginning to bite, and many people are having great difficulty to pay for their mortgages. The gap between rich and poor in our country widens every day: footballers & the city bankers may not know what to do with their obscene salaries, but for many people its a struggle to survive
- Translate all this into personal terms and the result may not be too good either. Some of you here are concerned for your family – for your parents; for your children. Others are perhaps concerned about your job prospects; will you get promotion this year; or will you still have a job by the end of the year. Or maybe your concerns relate to your personal finances: will I be able to pay my university or college fees; will I be able to keep up the repayments on my mortgage. Or maybe your concerns relate to exams: how will I cope? Will I get the A levels I need? The degree class I need?

But God says "**Do not be afraid**".

Indeed, he says it not just once, but twice. And he gives three good reasons why we should not be afraid..

1. I KNOW YOU

"I have called you by name - you are mine" (43.1)

God knows you, he knows me. He knows each one of us by name.

When you consider the population of the UK, let alone the population of the world, that is an amazing feat.

As far as national insurance is concerned, I am simply a number: YS 87 99 26B

As far as the European Union is concerned, I am just a number: 3067-44837

The same is true of the RAC: I am just 05 0381 8435

Likewise I am just a number for Mastercard and for Visa – however, for reasons of security I don't think I will repeat the numbers to you!

Indeed, it doesn't matter what organisation or government agency it is, they don't want to know my name, they want to know my number. I am but a digit.

But as far as God is concerned I am a name - and you are a name.

The God who called Moses by name and Samuel by name, is also the God who calls you and me by name.

The mind boggles - the God who brought the stars into being - the God who is behind the whole evolutionary process - this God knows you and me by name.

As far as he is concerned, we are important. We count. He knows us by name. He will care for us. My mind goes to some words of Jesus spoken to his disciples: **“Aren’t five sparrows sold for two pennies? Yet not one sparrow is forgotten by God. Even the hairs of your head have all been counted. So do not be afraid; you are worth much more than many sparrows”** (Luke 12.6,7)|

2. I LOVE YOU

You are precious to me... I love you (43.4)

Here is the second reason not to be afraid. God loves you – he loves me
And precisely because he loves you, he wants the very best for you.

Alas, we live in a world where so many people feel unloved.
Some years ago on the American CBS Evening News, an 11-year old girl was asked to comment on the announcement that two of her classmates had killed an immigrant labourer in cold blood. With deep sadness the girl said: *“They needed someone who loved them and showed them that, someone who really cared for them”*.
Sadly there are many thousands of young people growing up without love and without hope in the world. Indeed, it is not just young people. I meet a good number of older people who just do not know what it is to be loved.

But God loves each one of us.

Again, I find this fact mind-boggling.

I can understand God loving some of the really special people of this world – the Mother Teresas and the Nelson Mandelas – people who have really made this world a better place for many. But to love a person like me, that is truly amazing.

But that’s the wonder of God’s love.

It doesn’t matter who we are or what we have done – or indeed not done - God loves us
God loves us so much that he gave his only Son

Amidst all the uncertainties of the coming months, here is one thing of which we can be certain. Here is a foundation on which we can build our lives.

3. I WILL BE WITH YOU

“When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you” (43.2)

The third reason for not being afraid is that God will be with us.

What’s more, he will be with us not just in the good times, but more importantly, he will also be with us in the tough times.

"When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you. When you pass through fire, you will not be burnt,; the hard trials that come will not hurt you.

Do notice that God does not promise a trouble-free life.

God does not say that we shall not pass through deep waters: rather, when we pass through deep waters, we shall not be alone.

Contrary to popular opinion Christians have never pretended that their faith is a passport to a life of ease - indeed, sometimes the very opposite...

But we need not fear, for he will be with us. And what a difference it makes. For it means that our **“troubles will not overwhelm”** us.

As I look back on my life I can testify to that fact from my own personal experience.

There have been times when life has been pretty tough - when things have been pretty black - when mentally and spiritually I have been pretty low - but God has been there.

If I'm honest, sometimes I did not always sense his presence - but instead he sent his messengers - time and again he sent friends who stood by me and helped me through.

He did not let me down - he stood by me.

What was true for me, I believe can be true for you too.

So, as we look forward to the coming year, we can look forward with confidence

However challenging life is going to be, we need not be afraid.

For God is going to be there, rooting for us.

I know you

I love you

I will be with you

What more could we want than that?