

ISAIAH 7.14: GOD HAS GIVEN US A SIGN; EMMANUEL – THEN AND NOW *[Chelmsford 6 December 2009]*

1. TRUST GOD

Have you ever been well and truly scared? I remember one occasion when I was scared: I had been summoned to appear before the headmaster, who wasn't pleased at my having thumbed a police car for a lift. I thought I was in for a caning!

This morning I want to speak of an occasion when Ahaz and his people were scared stiff.

Indeed, we are told that **He and all his people were so terrified that they trembled like trees shaking in the wind**" (Is 7.2).

It happened in 735 BC. Assyria under Tiglath Pileser III was in the business of empire-building. From Isaiah 7.1 we discover that a coalition had been formed against the Assyrian king: the ringleaders of this coalition were Rezin, king of Syria, and Pekah, king of Israel.

Judah had been invited to become part of the coalition, but king Ahaz had refused.

Perhaps he felt that such a provocative action would not effectively stem Assyria's advance, but would just put Judah into far greater danger.

Then matters went from bad to worse. Rezin & Pekah decided to march against Jerusalem and remove Ahaz in favour of Tabeel, one of their own protégées (7.6).

At this point Ahaz' heart went like the clappers – he and all his people were scared stiff.

What should he do? He hadn't a hope against the joint forces of Syria and Israel. There was only one course of action open to him: viz. send money to Assyria, in the hope that by making himself his vassal the Assyrian king would come to his aid. So according to 2 Kings 16.7,8 Ahaz sent this message to the Assyrian king: **"I am your devoted servant. Come and rescue me from the kings of Syria and of Israel who are attacking me". Ahaz took the silver and gold from the Temple and the palace treasury and sent it as a present to the emperor**".

It was not the bravest of moves. It involved the selling out of the country's independence. But at least it would save Ahaz' position, if not his skin.

At this point Isaiah went to see Ahaz **"on the road where the cloth makers work, at the end of the ditch that brings water from the upper pool"** (7.3), Ahaz was checking out the city's water-supply in preparation for the inevitable siege.

But Isaiah told Ahaz to **"stay calm and not be frightened or disturbed"** (Isaiah 7.4).

The kings of Syria and Israel he said, are **"no more dangerous than the smoke from two smouldering sticks"** (7.4) – their anger against you will soon burn itself out.

And Isaiah was right: Syria was crushed in 732 BC.

As for Israel, she lost her northern territories in 734 BC, her national existence in 722, and by 670 BC she had lost her racial existence.

Don't panic, Ahaz – don't be afraid – God is in control. Just trust God

"If your faith is not enduring you will not endure" (v9)

"If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all" (NRSV); "If you don't take your stand in faith, you won't have a leg to stand on" (Peterson, The Message).

Believing is the way to survive. Ahaz, put your trust in God.

2. TRUST GOD – HE IS WITH YOU

Ahaz was not convinced. So, **“The Lord sent another message to Ahaz (presumably through Isaiah): ‘Ask the Lord your God to give you a sign’”** (v10). But Ahaz refused.

Somewhat sanctimoniously he replied: **“I will not ask for a sign. I refuse to put the Lord to the test”** (v12). Perhaps he felt that the situation had got beyond God.

It is in this context that Isaiah said to Ahaz that if he would not ask for a sign, then God would take the initiative and give him a sign that he was with him: Look at 7.14-16

“The Lord himself will give you a sign. A young woman who is pregnant will have a son and will name him ‘Immanuel’ [Immanuel is a Hebrew word which means ‘God is with us’]. By the time he is old enough to make his own decisions, people will be drinking milk and eating honey. Even before that time comes the lands of those two kings who terrify you will be deserted” (vv14-16)

What was this sign? Traditionally Christians have believed that Isaiah was looking forward to the birth of Jesus. Indeed, Matthew explicitly took this verse and applied it to Jesus. So we read in his account of the nativity: **“Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said come true, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called Immanuel (which means, ‘God is with us’”** (Matt 1,22,23).

But was Isaiah really looking ahead to the coming of Jesus? If so, then how could it be a sign to Ahaz? Remember, it was 735 BC. From the perspective of Ahaz such a prophecy, if not a nonsense, would have been an irrelevance. Furthermore, such a prophecy would have been out of kilter with the rest of Isaiah’s ministry as a prophet: for like all the other OT prophets, he was concerned for the present, not for the future: prophets weren’t fortune-tellers; they were in the business of speaking into the social and political events of the day.

Let’s look more closely at this sign found in Is 7.14.

If on Christmas Eve you listen to the Service of Nine Lessons and Carols coming from King’s College, Cambridge, you will hear the words of the Authorised Version: **“Behold a virgin shall conceive”**. The NIV is very similar: **“The virgin will be with child”**.

But the underlying Hebrew word itself (*’almah*) simply denotes a young woman.

Let me quote to you the footnote in the GNB: *“The Hebrew word translated ‘young woman’ is not the specific term for ‘virgin’, but refers to any young woman of marriageable age”*.

The word says nothing about her lack of sexual activity. True, in the light of the then ethical and social standards, most girls covered by this term would have been virgins, but the emphasis here is on the fact that it was a young woman who was due to give birth. Had the emphasis been on virginity then Isaiah would surely have used the Hebrew word for virgin (*bethulah*)..

As a result most modern versions of the Bible omit any reference to a virgin here in Isaiah 7 – they speak just of a young woman. Many use the definite article and suggest that Isaiah had a particular young woman in question: *“Look, the young woman will be with child”*. It appears that Isaiah was referring to someone whose identity was known both to him and to Ahaz .

According to a Jewish tradition, Isaiah was actually referring to his own wife.

The NRSV & the GNB adopt a slightly different translation. They translate use the present tense: “**Look the young woman is with child**” (NRSV); “**the young woman who is pregnant will have a son**” (GNB). This is a possible translation of the Hebrew text.. If so then Isaiah was referring to something already in the process of happening.

Look, Ahaz, this woman is a sign of God’s presence with you
Before this child has reached the years of discretion and is able to distinguish good and evil, the your enemies will have been defeated. What’s more people will then be “**drinking milk and eating honey**”: i.e. food rationing would be over & there would be an abundance everywhere..

The thrust of Isaiah’s ‘prophecy’ was therefore this: ‘Ahaz, put your trust in God, not in the might of Assyria. For within a short space of time prosperity and freedom will have returned again. As a sign of God’s presence with you the young woman is (or shall be) with child and shall bear a son and shall name him Immanuel. Faith is the key’.

Isaiah was not referring to the future miracle of the incarnation, but to the fact that just as God had been with his people in the past, so he would continue to be with them.

The birth of this child ‘Immanuel’ was an acted parable of his presence.

3. JESUS - GOD WITH US

So did Matthew get it wrong when in his account of the birth of Jesus he wrote: “**Now all this happened in order to make what the Lord had said through the prophet come true, ‘A virgin will become pregnant and have a son, and he will be called “Immanuel”’ (which means, “God is with us”)**” (Matt 1.22,23)?

No, Matthew didn’t get it wrong. Here we have a case of Isaiah speaking better than he knew. Or rather, here we have a case of a translator being inspired, albeit unwittingly, to produce a version which matched even more closely the birth of Jesus.

Let me explain. When the Hebrew text of the Old Testament was translated into Greek some 200 years before the birth of Jesus, the translator rendered the Hebrew word for young woman in Isaiah 7 by the normal Greek word for ‘virgin’ (*parthenos*), a meaning the Hebrew could bear, but does not demand.

As it so happened, Jesus was indeed born of a **virgin**. Needless to say, it didn’t then take long for Christians like Matthew to spot the significance of this Greek word and to identify Isaiah’s ‘prophecy’ with the virginal conception of Jesus.

Furthermore, along with this ‘coincidence’ of translation, there was also the incredibly appropriate title of **Emmanuel**, ‘God with us’: what better description could there be of God incarnate!

But can we honestly speak with Matthew of ‘prophecy fulfilled’? I believe we can.

For in fulfilling the prophecy beyond Isaiah's original intention, God did what he often does – in the words of the Apostle Paul “**he is able to do so much more than we can ever ask for or even think of**” (Eph 3.20)

Isaiah looked forward to the day when God would intervene and save his people.

In the coming of Jesus God did indeed intervene – but far from saving his people from some external political threat, he saved us from the deepest threat of all – the threat of sin, and of the deadly consequences. To quote the Apostle Paul again: “**For sin pays its wage – death; but God's gift is eternal life in union with Christ Jesus our Lord**” (Rom 6.23)

In effect what happened was the nature of God's salvation foretold by Isaiah was deepened, and the timing of God's salvation was lengthened.

When I was a PhD student I spent a year in Zurich where my mentor was the eminent Swiss theologian Eduard Schweizer. Schweizer, who liked to ski in the Alps, said: “*Under certain kinds of illumination, a series of mountain ranges may be perceived as a single chain, without any suspicion of how many valleys lie between the first slope and the highest ridge; in like manner the prophets see God's saving work in the immediate and in the distant future as a single act*”.

4. TRUST GOD TODAY

Well, all that is very interesting, you might say, but what on earth has Isaiah 7 got to say to us today? Maybe there is something here for ancient historians, but for most people the geo-politics of 27 centuries ago is utterly irrelevant. Ahaz, Pekah, Rezin – frankly we couldn't care a tinker's cuss for any of them!

That is true – and yet we cannot simply dismiss this passage

For, as we have been recognising on this so-called ‘Bible Sunday’, the Bible is no ordinary book. It is God's book –and in this book we have a record of how God has spoken to people.

Indeed, the experience of the Christian church is that through this book God continually speaks to his people.

Surprising as it may seem, God can even speak to us through the story of Ahaz, Pekah and Rezin.

In particular he speaks to us through Isaiah's word to Ahaz when he felt threatened by Pekah and Rezin. Have faith, declared Isaiah. Trust God. Believe in God: “**If your faith is not enduring, you will not endure**” “**If you do not stand firm in faith, you shall not stand at all**” “**If you don't take your stand on faith, you won't have a leg to stand on**” (Is 7.9).

The need to trust God is the enduring principle – and in particular the need to trust that God is with us.

This morning I want to apply this call to have faith in God in three particular ways – to put your trust in the God who was there with us in the past, is with us in the present and will be there in the future too

1. First, at this time of Advent we need to believe that ***God was with us in Jesus***; that God came amongst us in the person of Jesus, our Emmanuel; that in the birth of Jesus God was at work, seeking to bring about the salvation of the world. Yes, that's the amazing message of this time of the year. As Paul wrote to the Galatians: "**When the right time finally came, God sent his own Son. He came as the son of a human mother and lived under the Jewish law, to redeem those who were under the Law, so that we might become God's sons and daughters**" (Gal 4.4). Jesus came to save – indeed, the very name Jesus means: "Saviour". But for that salvation to become effective in our lives, we need to believe, and to hang on to that belief! In the words of Isaiah 7, we need to "**stand firm in faith**".

2. Secondly, we need to believe that ***God is with us today***. Let's face it, for many people today, life is tough. A third of the work-force at Vauxhall Luton are losing their jobs; and what is happening at Luton is happening elsewhere. People are losing jobs; pensions are no longer what they once were and people are having to work longer; personal debt is increasing and making life a misery for many. But life can be tough in other ways too: it's tough when one's health begins to give way; it's tough too when a loved one's health begins to give way; dying can be such a slow, lingering business. Families too can be tough: this morning we have been rejoicing in the gift of Chloe – children can be a great blessing; but children can too be a great source of pain. Forgive me if I am depressing you; but I am just describing life as it is for many of us. But thank God there is more to say than that life can be tough – the good news is that God is with us. In the words of Isaiah 43: "**Do not be afraid – I will save you. I have called you by name – you are mine. When you pass through deep waters, I will be with you; your troubles will not overwhelm you**". Hear too the promise of the Risen Lord Jesus to his disciples: "**I will be with you always**" (Matt 28.20), said Jesus. Jesus, our Emmanuel, is with us today. So let's put our trust in him. In the words of Isaiah, we need to "**stand firm in faith**".

3. Thirdly, we need to believe that ***God will be with us forever***. The Book of Revelation assures us, that, when God restores all things at the end of time, "**God himself will be with them, and he will be their God. He will wipe away all tears from their eyes. There will be no more death, no more grief or crying or pain. The old things have disappeared**" (Rev 21.3,4). Life can be incredibly depressing. Let me be honest: when Gordon Brown announced another 500 troops for Afghanistan, my heart sank. When will it all end? I don't know – and I suspect nobody knows. But what I do know, is that one day peace and justice will reign. One day all the unfairness and all the suffering of life will end. In the meantime "**stand firm in faith**". For those who believe, and hang on to that belief, there is a wonderful future.

So, as you begin to hang up your decorations, write your cards, and stir the pudding, say to yourself: '**Immanuel** – God was with us, God is with us, God will be with us'. Goodness, you'll want to keep up the decorations forever!

