

Isaiah 35:1-10 Struggle to victory

During this week and last week, I spent several days at the evacuation centre in Batemans Bay. The venue was the pavillion and showground. People arrived in clusters, as various areas north of the Bay were added to the evacuation list. The showground slowly filled with those who had caravans, while the rest were deployed to stay with family and friends. People were tense and anxious, though I'd have to say the feel of the centre didn't come anywhere near the tragedy of the evacuation centre during the Tathra fires. That was pretty grim!

Navigating bushfire danger is part of being Australian, as are the droughts and flooding rains that characterise our climate - though we seem to be seeing far more of drought than the flooding rains these days!

Former prime minister Malcolm Fraser once said, "Life wasn't meant to be easy." Well, he got that right, didn't he? Ever since the fall, humankind's journey through life has been one of struggle and pain. But not exclusively so. Life also gives us experiences of redemption and recreation.

Driving through Tathra now, two years down the track, the blackened trees are still in evidence, but so is new growth, bursting from the ashes, despite the drought.

God has an amazing ability to take what has been messed up and even destroyed and restore it – to make it new. In that, we have a glimpse of our future, both temporal and eternal!

In our reading from Isaiah today, we see something of that same pattern – although to see it, we need to note what has gone before in the previous chapter.

In the previous chapter (34), we have a tirade of judgement from Isaiah against the nations that have oppressed Israel:

Draw near, O nations, to hear; For the LORD is enraged against all the nations, and furious against all their hordes; he has doomed them, has given them over for slaughter. Their slain shall be cast out, and the stench of their corpses shall rise; the mountains shall flow with their blood.

...and it continues in that vein. God is angry with the nations and for their sin they have come under his judgement.

If you've read Isaiah, you'll know he prophesies fiercely about God's judgement – and we get all the gory details! But you could never call Isaiah simply a prophet of doom. It seems at the slightest provocation, He becomes a poet and a songster when he sees what God has in store for His people.

Every time Isaiah is compelled to prophesy about the judgment of God, he follows with a picture of God's redemptive purpose. Throughout the book, as his oracles of

punishment get deeper and more severe, so his oracles of promise soar to new heights.

So, after Isaiah's gory revelation of God's fury against the nations and Edom in chapter 34, we find in today's reading his vision of the future transformation of Zion. Listen to this:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus. It shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. ... They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God.

To illustrate the restoration of Zion, Isaiah uses the metaphor of a desert being transformed by rain. Just as the devastation of the nations reflected the fall of creation, so the transformation of the desert to a garden reflects the transformation and renewal of God's people.

In his mind Isaiah may well have been picturing the desert region near him, known as the Arabah. It's a deep valley below sea level—uninhabited, unproductive, and uninviting; the Simpson Desert of the Middle East. The transformation of that desert into a carpet of crocuses would have been an incredible sight!

Every person who had seen the Arabah come alive after rain, would have understood what Isaiah was saying.

Jay and I watched a mini series earlier in the year, called "The Earth's Great Rivers. It was the most amazing programme, showing how the retreat of the water in the dry season drew all life away with it, leaving the earth parched and dry, with animals struggling and dying; yet when the rains came and the water returned, the desert began to burst with life! Incredible photography.

I actually saw something of this phenomenon first hand, when I visited Alice Springs and Ayers rock on a school trip as a teenager. It had just rained, and there were wildflowers as far as the eye could see! The place was alive with birds and bugs. Lots of bugs!

Many of us, I know, could relate to Isaiah's picture of transformation!

The next few verses contain an exhortation to God's people. They had become, understandably, disheartened, depressed and hopeless. They couldn't see any way forward – ever. God, through Isaiah, tells them not to give up – to hang in there as their redemption will come.

**Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees.
Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God..."**

This is where this passage about judgement and restoration begins to impact on our own lives.

It is relevant of course, in that as we await the second coming of Jesus to finally set to rights all that is wrong in the world, we must wait with patience and courage, despite all that we see falling apart around us. In fact our Epistle reading today from James reinforces this:

Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near.

But this passage also impacts on us much closer to home. How often have we experienced times of great difficulty in our lives? Times when we've really struggled with something, to the extent that we begin to feel there is no way forward, no hope of relief?

The things we struggle with in our lives change with the decades, don't they? For young people looking for work, life can seem hopeless because no-one will give them a job. They eke out a living from one Centrelink payment to the next.

Then when our families come along, that period can have its struggles. Children make demands on our time, our energy and our finances. Some of the mums at Mainly Music come in at times looking distinctly haggard. One of them was telling me on Friday that her youngest wakes up every two hours during the night. She's been losing sleep, with a crying baby and and and active toddler! These 30-somethings juggle jobs and family and work so hard they have no time for themselves – life can definitely be a struggle.

Then as we age, there is a whole new set of problems as our agility diminishes, and our health declines. We might struggle as we care for a spouse who is ill – and we wonder if life is ever going to change....

The Lord has encouragement for us all today:

From Isaiah 35: **Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God.**

And from James 5: **Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord.**

We know James is speaking here about the coming of Jesus at his return, but the encouragement is just as applicable as we wait for God's deliverance in whatever struggle currently assails us.

Our God is not a remote or uncaring God, who makes no real difference in our lives - though I imagine it sometimes feels that way. Our God is a loving, compassionate and powerful God, who has borne our griefs and carried our sorrows. Isaiah said that too, didn't he? (54:3)

When we are beset by griefs and sorrows and sickness and infirmity, it can be very helpful to take a step back as it were; to shift our focus for a moment from the thing in front of us that is demanding so much of us, and intentionally focus on Jesus.

One of the most amazing people I've ever met was a priest in this diocese called Ruth Dudley. She died a few years ago. Some of you will have known her. She had polio as a young child and spend the first ten years of her life hospital.

She had many years of immobility, but then advances in surgery enabled her to eventually walk unaided. She married and had a family, but that was also fraught with tragedy. She lost her 5 year old son to cancer. In there somewhere, she was called to ministry - and struggled there too. She was in the first group of women ordinands who were sent home from her ordination service, due to a legal injunction brought by the Sydney Diocese, stopping the ordination. (the women were ordained the following year, though) There were many more trials in Ruth's life, the last of which was tragic. A stroke left her paralysed and unable to speak. Ruth lost her home and her ministry of Spiritual direction which she loved, and was confined to a high care nursing home. But honestly, she was one of the deepest, most joyous Christians I have ever known.

God took the things that were broken and damaged in her life and transformed them into strength, compassion, love, wisdom. She was one amazing woman!

God promises that the time will come...

“(when) the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy....”

God ultimately has a very different future in store for all his people. These words speak of our eternal future, but God also allows his people to experience his promises in part in the here and now.

Isaiah's imagery is not part of our experience, but the meaning is clear. God is on our side. He is there for us. He will bring us through our struggles to victory. He asks us to trust him, and to wait patiently, in faith. As Isaiah says, “they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.”

Let's pray