

ISAIAH 5: 1-7

This is simply wonderful material!

You know – I have friends who thought I was crazy to be involved in the church, and who have told me all along that if I want to get the message of God to people, I should do it in another way – They said, and still say – that people get into “church mode” on Sunday morning, turn off, and aren’t open to hearing what is really being said.

As soon as the preacher begins to speak, they say, people settle in, have an idea of what they expect to hear and how long it should take to say it, respond to the tone of your voice, and that’s it. You’ve lost them.

What do you think about that? Is that true? They’ve often said to me – take the message to the streets – write a novel – a volume of poetry – talk in restaurants, pubs, theatres – people will listen there.

Well – whether or not my friends are right, that’s exactly what Isaiah is doing here. Just watch how he does it.

Just for review first: this is from FIRST ISAIAH. The book of Isaiah as we have it in the Bible is really written by three different authors at three different times in Israel’s history. Chapters 1-39 are by Isaiah of Jerusalem, living and speaking in Israel before its demise. The country appears to be fairly stable – people are comfortable, there are no major disasters happening, they still worship, but they don’t take it too seriously – all the marks of a society not thinking about itself, or its purpose. Isaiah was NOT impressed.

Do you remember how he let them have it last week about their worship practices? (read some of chapter 1)

Well, today he’s a little more subtle than that.

Picture the scene: it’s a festival. There are people from everywhere gathered in Jerusalem, to celebrate the harvest with the feast of Tabernacles. It’s an atmosphere with a lot of excitement, kids running around, special foods, music, worship too of course....

The image I get is a sort of rendezvous, old home week type of thing. People milling around, mingling, enjoying the celebration, catching up with each other....

And there’s Isaiah, right in the middle of it. He speaks to the people around....almost like a busker.

“Let me sing you a song” he says.

“Great – yes, sing us a song”

“It’s a love song”

“Good! We like love songs”

“It’s a sad love song – about my beloved and his vineyard”

Well, everyone knows that sad love songs are the best, and so people gathered around, eager to hear.

“Shhh! He’s going to sing”

And Isaiah begins to sing.

“My beloved had a vineyard on a very fertile hill”

He was good. They loved it. More and more people gathered. The song continued.

“He dug it and cleared it of stones and planted it with choice vines.”

Now, many of these people listening are owners or vineyards themselves. Or workers in them. This is familiar stuff. He’s singing about what they know. YOU know – the music of the people. Folk music. About what they know, places they know, work they understand, The music of the people. They listened, tapping their toes....

Isaiah sang on.

“He built a watchtower in the midst of it and hewed out a wine vat in it...”

This is great! This song has all the marks of a hit – did he write it himself? Yea – it’s his own material!

They knew that to build a watchtower and a vat in the field was an expensive proposition – a huge investment – a risk someone was willing to take only if that person had a lot of faith that this vineyard was an excellent one, and would produce good fruit for a long time.

They knew what was coming, though....love songs....sad ones....always go that way. Sure enough....here it came....

“He expected it to yield grapes. But it yielded sour grapes”.

Ah. A familiar song pattern. Isaiah is singing about WHAT they know in a WAY they know. In other times and places, the song would have the woman run off with another man, or have the dog die....you know how those songs go. This is not new to them or to us. It’s a story about heartbreak. Isaiah is brilliant.

Then, he draws the crowd into the song. The second verse asks them what he should have done – was there anything else he could do? WHY, he asks his audience, did that field yield sour grapes? YOU judge – who is the wronged party here?

Verses 3 and 4

“You did everything you could” the crowd says – “It’s not your fault. It’s the vineyard. You cared for it, you invested in it, you gave it your best. We know what that’s like.”

And they did.

Maybe some of them had had that very same experience with a farm....land that you invest your life savings in that should have produced and even after all your hard work, does not....

Some of them would be thinking of relationships they'd had – friendships, or romantic relationships that they'd really given themselves to and felt that all they got in return was pain

And some of them, parents, would be thinking of their children as the vineyard. Kids to whom they had given their heart and soul – so much love and care and time and money given to them, invested in them, so many hopes and dreams resting on them – and all of that for nothing, it seems, as they watch those children throw it all away. Sour grapes.

A song like that touches us each in a different way, but even though they can be corny and maudlin, they've popular because everyone sometimes has had an experience of being hurt like that. And the song dredges up those memories – that feeling.

And so the audience – a bit weepy by now – says

"It wasn't your fault, you did everything you could." And so Isaiah keeps singing.

The third verse begins to express the anger that often comes with being hurt. They'd identify with that too. The singer is putting into words feelings they'd known deep inside themselves but perhaps never given voice

Verses 5 and 6 *"And now I will tell you what I will do to my vineyard. I will remove its hedge and it shall be devoured; I will break down its wall; and it shall be trampled down. I will make it a waste; it shall not be pruned or hoed, and it shall be overgrown with briars and thorns; I will also command the clouds that they rain no rain up on it"*

Wait a minute – what did he say?

Repeat verse 6 *"I will command the clouds that they rain no rain upon it"*

They begin to get a bit uneasy....who IS this?

But quickly, before they can think about that too much, the song goes on

Verse 7 *"For the vineyard of the Lord of hosts is the house of Israel, and the people of Judah are his pleasant planting; he expected justice, but saw bloodshed, righteousness, but heard a cry".*

What a finish! They hadn't seen that coming at all. Just when he had them with the song – feeling tender and recalling times when they, like the owner of the vineyard, had been hurt or betrayed or had a huge failure in spite of your best efforts....

Just as they're feeling those feelings and into the song, he says

YOU are the vineyard.

YOU are the ones giving sour grapes.

God is the planter – the tender – the one who gave everything

And YOU are the ones who have not given back. It's perfect. A perfect vehicle for reaching people with the way it looks from God's side of things. And ingenious way to help them look at themselves and their own actions in the grand scheme of things and to examine what kind of grapes they were producing.

This is wonderful stuff. Much better than a sermon. :0)

Can't you just picture it?

The last two lines are very good:

"He expected justice but saw bloodshed;

Righteousness, but heard a cry"

The fruit God expects from us is justice and righteousness. God, like the farmer, planted, chose us carefully, gave everything to nurture us and help us grow, invested life savings, if you will – expecting us to flourish. Expecting us to grow and produce justice and righteousness

Instead, we produce bloodshed. Instead of righteousness, crying.

In Hebrew, these lines are especially good. My Hebrew isn't good enough to have noticed but the commentators point out that the words for justice and bloodshed, are different by only a couple of letters. Likewise for righteousness and crying. It's a pun, but more than that.

It's as though Isaiah is saying that our worst failures are not merely refusing to do what God demands,

Our worst failures are a perversion of the best in us. With just a slight twist, just a change of a letter....justice becomes bloodshed. With just a small change – a couple of letters – righteousness becomes crying.

This song is very well written.- beautiful poetry, beautiful imagery....a true Word from God.

For now I simply offer it to you – this image of God, who is NOT an angry judge, NOT the strict school principal about to give us a huge detention, that stuff of some of our youths. God rather, through the song of the prophet – God the lover, who aches, who hurts, who is angry but hopeful when betrayed.

God who loves us with a passion that hurts.

And who calls us to integrity of living; that makes us worthy of the cloud of witnesses by whom we are surrounded, who calls us to a life that is musical in its passion to do what is right and just

And who holds out to us the open arms of a lover to whom we can return when the world has twisted justice to bloodshed and righteousness to a cry.