

- (1) *They will beat their swords into ploughshares,
And their spears into pruning hooks.
Nation will not take up sword against nation,
Nor will they train for war anymore.***

What a vision! If only, if only, we say to ourselves.

This is what Isaiah, son of Amoz, saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem – this was his vision from God of a great day that was to come, for his own country and for all the other nations.

This is the Isaiah, the great poetic prophet of the OT, to whom Wm Hayes so expertly introduced you last Sunday.

Some people think that Isaiah's words came from a piece of popular poetry in circulation at the time, for they were also used by one of the other prophets, Micah. But popular words or not, they don't sound like very realistic words – either for the people then, or for us today on another Remembrance Sunday. They don't seem to have much to do with the way the world really is now, or was then!

The way it actually was in Isaiah's day is described in 2:7 – *Their land is full of horses; there is no end to the chariots*, and later in 3:25 – *Your men will fall by the sword, your warriors in battle.*

The gates of Zion will lament and mourn;

And what is the reality in our day?

Black Watch soldiers in peril of their life on the banks of the Euphrates, and American forces engaged in fierce house to house fighting in Falluja. Whatever the rights and wrongs of the Iraq conflict, it is certainly not a situation where ploughshares and pruning hooks look like replacing swords and spears!

And it is not only in Iraq – the whole world seems a far more dangerous place than it was even a few years ago – you only have to think about the horrendous possibilities that surround the kidnapping of Annetta Flanagan in Afghanistan; the uncertainties of the Middle East highlighted by the death of Yassa Arafat; the world wide threat of extreme versions of Islam – as well as the

questions that not a few people in the western world have about George W Bush and his approach to the war on terrorism And we could go on.

So what are we to make of Isaiah's famous words about ploughshares and pruning hooks, and nations training for war no more? Are these Bible words relevant at all on Remembrance Sunday 2004?

Well, the overall thing we must say plainly, and understand, clearly is that Isaiah was no foolish dreamer – he most certainly did not live in a pretend world, where he just closed his eyes to the way things really were. Isaiah understood that the day he saw in his prophecy might be a very long way off – there would almost certainly be much more struggle and suffering before that day came – but, he says, *in the last days, the mountain of the Lord will be established, and all nations will stream to it ... and he will settle disputes for many peoples.*

In other words, Isaiah understands himself to be declaring God's ultimate plan for his world; his determined purpose for the nations; his sure promise to his people – this is what will be - in the last days – because the Lord reigns and will have the final word and way. This is the word of the Lord.

So it is a very long-term vision – and we have to understand that, for otherwise it just doesn't make much sense, even if it sounds nice! It is a vision of hope and encouragement.

But we cannot just put this vision 'on the long finger', and sit back waiting for it to happen – If we profess to trust in Isaiah's God, and who say that we live under his authority, we have to take this vision seriously, now! If this is God's ultimate purpose and intention, then at least some of this vision must become our immediate purposes and ways - our guiding principles for life now – even if there are many situations and circumstances far beyond our control. We cannot ever say to ourselves – this is what God wants and will do in the future, but there is nothing I can do about it now!

So as we look at what Isaiah saw in ‘last days’, we need to think about the present days, and try to think about the present in the light of this future.

So what did he see?

1. He saw ploughshares and pruning hooks instead of swords and spears. (2)

He sees a day of purposeful planting and happy harvesting, with a rewarding outcome for all, instead of the suffering and sacrifice and tragic outcomes that human conflict always produces.

God’s clear purpose and determined intention is the former rather than the latter, says Isaiah – and therefore, it seems right to me that God’s people should be people who are always committed to, and striving for, a world of purposeful planting and happy harvesting with a rewarding outcome for all.

Not that the Bible is unrealistic, not that we are to be naïve.

Isaiah, as we have seen was not a dreamer – he knew how things were and would almost certainly continue to be. And the Word of God recognises the sad reality of evil powers and dangerous people in the world who must sometimes be restrained by force – the Bible is not ‘soft’ on these things.

But, Isaiah’s vision, if it means anything for us now, must surely mean that we need to guard very carefully against the danger of glorifying war, or glamorising conflict. War and conflict that is for real is a very different thing from the Hollywood screen version, and we need to understand the difference! And those who have actually served know that difference better than any.

Yes, of course, serving one’s country in times of conflict requires great courage; it and develops wonderful leadership and comradeship; and it produces immense acts of bravery and sacrifice – all of which we rightly remember and honour today.

But it is also a terrible, terrible business – men and women endure awful conditions, they see things of which they do not want to speak, they are caught up in experiences of injuries and deaths most dreadful.

And all of this is true for service personnel, and also for civilian populations – both direct conflict and so called ‘collateral damage’ scars and shatters individual lives, numerous families and whole communities.

And yet, sometimes we make it all sound a bit too glorious and we can become a bit triumphalist in our outlook and attitudes. Of course I understand that the ceremonies and traditions, the colour and the music associated with the Forces, and connected to Remembrance Day is a helpful thing – and that the conflicts of which these things speak are often necessary and unavoidable things – please don’t misunderstand me, as we pay rightful tribute to courage and sacrifice today. Because of the fallen, sinful world in which we live force and conflict is sometimes the dreadful, only way.

And yet, history seems to teach us what Isaiah seems to have known then – that it is not unknown or impossible for wars and conflicts to be at least partly motivated and driven by greed and glory-seeking and godless motivation e.g. ch. 2:7 - 8, 15-17

But as people who take God and his Word seriously, let us always remind ourselves that God’s preference, God’s purpose, God’s promise, is for ploughshares instead of swords, and pruning hooks instead of spears – and that these must therefore always be the dominating preference and purpose of God-fearing, Christ trusting people. Therefore:

- There is to be no false or foolish glamour attached to days of conflict or days of remembrance.
- There is to be utter desire and every possible effort to avoid conflict and find other ways of resolving disputes.
- There is to be great care that we are not ultimately driven by the desire for material prosperity and power.
- There is to be earnest, unceasing prayer for people like President George Bush and PM Tony Blair, and others who are charged with such awesome responsibilities and who must make dreadfully difficult decisions that have such terrible implications for those who serve in uniform

and for the people who live in the parts of the world that will be directly affected.

Our determined desire must be for the day when they will not train for war anymore.

2. He saw all nations instead of just one nation. (3)

Remembrance Sunday is a day when our thoughts rightly have a focus on our own nation – our love for it and loyalty to it as the land of our birth, and our honouring of those who have given their lives in its defence. And, I believe that the Word of God clearly recognises and affirms this part of life.

(Matt.22: 21 *Render to Caesar that which is Caesar's*)

1st Peter 2:17 *Love the brotherhood of believers, fear God, honour the King.*) Being a good citizen in your nation is a good thing in Christian terms.

But in this prophecy where Isaiah speaks about God's full and final purpose for his world, there is a very strong emphasis on all the nations, and not just the one nation of which he and his people were a part.

Vs.2 *All nations will stream to it* (to the mountain of the Lord.)

Vs.4 *He will judge between the nations.*

Vs.4 *Nation will not take up sword against nation.*

So, says Isaiah, God's final plan and purpose will cross national boundaries, and be a far greater thing than any single nation's history or hopes.

In one way, Isaiah's hearers would have loved this message because the idea of all the other nations recognising and submitting to them would have been very appealing!

But in another way, it was a very difficult message for Isaiah's people because it meant that God was just as interested in the other nations as in them, and that he wanted the other nations to share equally in his love and hope also – and this would have been very difficult for a people who often liked to think that they were superior to all other nations, and might even have thought at

times that God's purpose was to wipe out all the others for they, alone, were God's favoured people.

Whatever they thought, Isaiah tells them of a day when, as a key part of God's purposes and promises, all nations will gather at God's mountain and submit themselves to God's ways.

In our day, we maybe still struggle a bit with all that it means to think in terms of 'all nations' and not just 'our nation'.

- Sometimes a proper love and loyalty to the nation can come close to being an idolatrous worship of all things patriotic.

- Sometimes a deep love for our own nation, culture and traditions can spill over into an unworthy attitude to other nations, cultures and traditions.

Would you be able to agree with me?

I was amused by an incident that happened during one of George Bush's presidential campaign speeches. Apparently '*God Bless America*' was the standard cue at the end of his speeches for the release of a sort of ticker tape celebration. However, during one speech, Bush, without thinking about it, used this phrase early on, unexpectedly – it wasn't part of the script – but, of course the person responsible for the ticker tape released the catch and down it all came, long before it was meant to.

I found myself wondering a little bit about whether the candidates using this phrase, *God Bless America*, were implying in any way that America was the nation God was specially interested in – that the election there was more important to God than elections in other nations.

Perhaps not – but it is an illustration of how we can sometimes 'grab God' for our own purposes, instead of submitting ourselves to his purposes and will.

When we sing the National Anthem, do we ever drift too close to that danger? It is a right thing to do on national occasions, but it mustn't be our way of 'grabbing God' for ourselves!

Maybe it is the same danger with the phrases *For God and Ulster* or the nationalist equivalent in terms of Ireland.

Isaiah's emphasis is on all the nations, not just one nation – his emphasis is such because that is God's ultimate emphasis. This kind of emphasis was probably a bit uncomfortable for the people of Isaiah's day – it also explains why people in Jesus' day couldn't cope too well with his openness to Samaritans and people who sided with the Roman administration in their country etc. Was God and the Gospel really for such people? And maybe sometimes we struggle too.

- As we listen to the world news do we, as Christian people, try to think about the issues in terms of all the nations, and not just our own nation – the economic issues that will have implications for the standard of life in other less developed nations as well as our own prosperous nation; the political issues that we might too easily dismiss because they don't seem to affect us even though they have desperate consequences for people in other nations.

- As we listen to the political issues being debated nearer to home, do we try hard to think about it from the perspective of others, as well as ourselves?

- As we hear about the growing problems of racism in N. Ireland, are we able to see that such attitudes or actions cannot be accepted or excused by those who say they live by faith in Christ and with obedience to the Word of God – for Isaiah's vision from God involved people of all nations, all colours and cultures!

Ploughshares and pruning hooks instead of swords and spears; all nations instead of just one nation ... Finally,

3. He saw people living by the light of the Lord rather than the law of the jungle. (4)

The very heart of Isaiah's vision of what is to come is that people of all nations and backgrounds will recognise the centrality and sovereignty of God, and will choose to submit themselves to him.

Many peoples will come and say: Come let us go up to the mountain of the Lord ... he will teach us his ways, so that we may walk in his paths.

As a result of learning to live in trust before God, they would learn to live together.

As a consequence of submitting to the ‘*word of the Lord from Jerusalem*’ they would submit their swords to be beaten into ploughshares and their spears into pruning hooks.

So, here we come to the crucially important foundations for understanding this wonderful piece of Isaiah’s poetry and vision. This is not a dreamer’s charter – these are not the words of someone who didn’t really understand how it is out there in the jungle of the real world – this is not the silly sentimentality of the person who is overly optimistic about human nature and just wishes that everybody would start being nice to each other!

This is the vision of a prophet who knew only too well that all too often it is ‘the law of the jungle’ out there – and that it is only when God’s light and power changes hearts and lives, attitudes and actions, that the world will be changed.

And so, the day of perfect peace will not come until the day of God’s final judgment upon a sinful world, and his day of full redemption for a trusting people.

However, this is not a reason for sitting back and doing nothing – we are not to say to ourselves that it is all hopeless and we can do nothing to make the world a better place – not are we to wash our hands of it all and think that it doesn’t matter what happens ‘out there’.

In a day, in a world, where Isaiah knew that all too often it was the law of the jungle, he issued a summons, a challenge to his people: *Come, O house of Jacob, let us walk in the light of the Lord* - A challenge to people who said that they were God’s people.

What might that mean for us in practical terms?

1. It surely means that it begins with us – that if we do not

start to live by the light of the Lord, how can we hope or pray for the day when God will start to change swords of conflict into ploughshares of peace?

We love those verses that tell us that *the Lord is my light and my salvation ...the stronghold of my life* (Ps. 27) or Jesus wonderful words in Jn.8:12 *I am the light of the world. Whoever follows me will never walk in darkness but will have the light of life.*

But those words have to take hold in our lives and begin to shape the way we live.

- Isaiah's vision had to begin with Isaiah's people.
- God's purpose and promise must begin with the people who say they are God's.

So this wonderful vision means that we have to affirm and confirm that we are indeed people who have brought our lives into the light of the Lord, the light of the Gospel – that we aren't people who, at heart, are still really giving our loyalty to the law of the jungle.

There is a Gospel call here – are we people of the Lord, or are we people of this divided and often bitter world that leaves out the Lord?

Are we people who recognise that Jesus, the light of the world, gave his life to open up the possibility and promise of this new day, or are we people who have never really seen that the Cross was necessary for people like us, who think that if we try hard we can do it ourselves, not recognising that by ourselves have a terrible tendency to live by the law of the jungle?

And if we say we have seen that, and put our trust in Jesus, the light of the world, are we allowing him to change some of our old thinking about swords and spears and old bitter divisions.

2. And this call to 'walk in the light of the Lord, also means that our deepest concern will be to see the light of the Lord spread to all nations. It's not just for some, it is for all- and it as people of all nations learn to 'walk in the light of the Lord' that Isaiah's vision of peace will come closer. Jesus, himself said, Go and

make disciples of all nations, and he who is ‘the light of the world, told his disciples that they were to reflect ‘the light of the world’.

The book of Revelation is the final poetic description of ‘the last days’ of which Isaiah wrote, and Rev. 7 speaks of *a great multitude that no-one could count, from every nation, tribe, people and language standing before the throne and in front of the Lamb.*

Such a vision should drive us out into our nation, and to our neighbouring nations, and to the whole wide world, with the Gospel of peace with God and peace with each other – and it should drive us to our knees to examine our deepest attitudes and desires for the peoples of other nations and cultures, for this vision leaves no room for any unworthy thoughts or attitudes towards others who come from a different history to ours.

‘*Come, let us walk in the light of the Lord*’ is a searching call to distinctive Christian attitudes in the realm of national and international affairs, and it is a rallying call to evangelism and mission throughout our own land and to the ends of the earth.

God’s purpose and promise, as described in Isaiah’s wonderful words, will come as God has already determined.

Until then, our world will always be a place of swords and spears and nations training for war.

But, until then, we are called to ‘walk in the light of the Lord’ rather than live by the law of the jungle. This is a loud Gospel call to all, and an ongoing gospel challenge to the way we think about everything and relate to others.

He saw ploughshares and pruning hooks instead of swords and spears.

He saw all nations instead of just one nation.

He saw people living by the light of the Lord rather than the law of the jungle. (5)

Sermon Powerpoint Slides

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