

Sunday 6th Sept 2015

Isaiah 35 Joy of the Redeemed Mark 7 The Syrophenician
Woman

Refrain

35.4 Say to those with fearful hearts "Be strong, do not fear your God will come, he will come with vengeance; with divine retribution he will come to save you. " 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped

Varifocal vision

I've just been prescribed varifocals from Specsavers and it hasn't made me feel any younger. Being able to see clearly however is important enough even to overcome my vanity. It's taking some getting used to, certain things which previously looked familiar need a particular angle or area of the lenses otherwise I can't make head nor tale of what's in front of me; my surroundings are a blur.

The future for all of us is a blur, full of hopes and fears, but for those with a clear vision they will find it much easier to work out how to survive, even to thrive, to blossom.

The need for Vision

All of us need a vision in order to stay motivated, some call it *hope*. Without hope we lose heart, our energy is drained. With eyes fixed on our goals however, all manner of obstacles and struggle will be overcome

We are who we are waiting for.

Czech dissident and president [Václav Havel](#) said it so well: “Hope is not the conviction that something will turn out well, but the certainty that something makes sense, regardless of how it will turn out.” We are the ones we are waiting for. It is we who announce to our listeners, “Here is your God.”

‘Is wasn’t all bad’ section of *The Week* magazine

A Londoner is believed to have set two new world records by riding from Land’s End to John O’Groats on a scooter. Russ Smith (36) set off on his Swifty Scooter last month and completed the 975-mile journey in three weeks. The worst part of the journey was “the vibration from the roads”, he said, which made his feet feel numb.

What vision motivated Russ Smith, perhaps it was for sponsorship for a charity. He had a vision and he acted upon it.

Chaos and Restoration

God had a vision for Israel – that they would be a light to the nations and give glory to God in their words and deeds. What we can read of in the bible is a history of the Jews laden with exile and repatriation, a tale of a

war torn people, persecuted and displaced as long ago as 500BC.

For God's chosen people, migration is not a new phenomenon. The prophet Isaiah starts his book telling the reader that he has a vision from God,

1 The vision concerning Judah and Jerusalem that Isaiah son of Amoz saw during the reigns of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.

2 Hear me, you heavens! Listen, earth! For the Lord has spoken: "I reared children and brought them up, but they have rebelled against me.

Chapter 34 speaks of apocalypse chaos and disaster – today's reading, chapter 35 speaks of restoration, resurrection, hope, even a picture of heaven.

If we look at the troubles in the world and conclude *God is Dead or just not interested* we forget the sweep of global history, the cycle of chaos and then resurrection, brought about not by the efforts and will power of human effort, but when people turn back to

worshipping God; God is very much alive and very interested in each one of us.

A God-centred life blossoms in both droughts and harvests

Why are we here at all? To love God and our neighbour and to help us do that God made himself known in the person of Jesus to show us a way to live that was God-centred not self-centred. A life founded upon revering God Almighty whose majesty is evident in the whole of creation will be sustained and thrive through the ups and downs.

It's not that all of our lives has a happy ending far from it, rather that the amazing project that God dared to initiate was to invite all of us to be part of the solution to the issues we see around us. Issues which represent a lack of justice, a lack of mercy, a failure on the part of some to have compassion.

God strengthens

This is what Isaiah the prophet does, his work is to be God's mouthpiece. He points out to the people that if only they would remember God's goodness, his patience, his long-suffering, then they will be strengthened, their weak hands and feeble knees will be fortified.

Henry has much learning ahead of him but there are certainly habits and lifestyle choices which will improve his chances to thrive and blossom even when faced with adversity. Mum and Dad will have views, that is, ways of looking at matters of morality and discipline in the way that they teach Henry about the world. And today they have sight of baptism as integral to giving him the best possible start on the Christian journey.

The manufacturer's instructions

The people of Israel 2500 years ago sometimes caught the vision that living God's way was best and they turned back to Him and experienced the blessing that comes from living according to the manufacturer's instructions.

If I clean my specs with a tissue, Specsavers reliably informed me, it's like rubbing the lenses against the bark of a tree; if I leave them on the dashboard in the blazing heat that we've experienced throughout August, hmmm, they'll bend out of shape. This doesn't make Specsavers able to predict the future, it's merely that if I don't follow the manufacturer's instructions, I won't have the best specs possible; my vision will be impaired, they'll be scratches and lenses bent out of shape.

If our vision is impaired we will misjudge things, interpret what lies ahead of us incorrectly. For the first

time ever, I have a pair of prescription sunglasses that come with a green tint. Now I can pretend to myself that I'm Tom Cruise in the cockpit of a fighter jet, but I'm more likely to push Jasmine in the buggy around Greville Smyth park. Either way, I'm seeing my surroundings with a tinted view – what lenses are you using to see the world around you?

God promises that if you follow His instructions, if you understand your life in the context of who Jesus is and what he has done to reconnect us all to God, you will flourish and blossom and thrive. God restored the livelihoods of the Jews more than once and he brings restoration out of chaos in our own lives too. But only if we catch a glimpse of who Jesus really is.

C. S. Lewis was an Oxford medieval Literature scholar, popular writer, Christian apologist, and former atheist. He used the argument outlined below in a series of BBC radio talks later published as the book *Mere Christianity*.

I am trying here to prevent anyone saying the really foolish thing that people often say about Him: I'm ready to accept Jesus as a great moral teacher, but I don't accept his claim to be God. That is the one thing we must not say. A man who was merely a man

and said the sort of things Jesus said would not be a great moral teacher. He would either be a lunatic — on the level with the man who says he is a poached egg — or else he would be the Devil of Hell. You must make your choice. Either this man was, and is, the Son of God, or else a madman or something worse. You can shut him up for a fool, you can spit at him and kill him as a demon or you can fall at his feet and call him Lord and God, but let us not come with any patronising nonsense about his being a great human teacher. He has not left that open to us. He did not intend to. ... Now it seems to me obvious that He was neither a lunatic nor a fiend: and consequently, however strange or terrifying or unlikely it may seem, I have to accept the view that He was and is God.[11]

Jesus was very insulting in today's reading from St Mark's Gospel, calling the foreign woman 'a dog' – this is not what we might expect from the gentle meek and mild imagery we have at Christmas of the infant in the manger. This term *dog* was a standard way of referring to the non-Jew, the Gentile.

But, the woman was undeterred – she'd got the vision of exactly who Jesus was and what he could do, namely to heal the sick the lame and the outcast. She understood that Jesus came for everyone that society rejects. She had spiritual eyes that were wide open to the truth.

Little wonder the disciples would have been astonished if not horrified. Given the sweep of history we've discussed, how God has protected and defended his people from the foreign infidels, warned them not to contaminate themselves with pagan practices. Now Jesus seems to be as much for the foreigner as his own people. Most amazing of all, however, is that the woman challenges Jesus and understand that God's saving grace is for everyone not just a select few. For her understanding, her vision of the real messiah, Jesus grants her request.

[Make your bed and lie in it](#)

We can look at the circumstances of others and say – you make your bed and lie in it – or you can apply the principles of the kingdom of God . Often when I get asked for money, it feels like I have to choose between being wise, not helping and risk being mean or generous and risk being naïve. Ideally, I'd rather be wise *and* generous, but there comes a time when we must risk naivety in order to have compassion, to ditch

long term strategy in order respond to the immediate crisis.

Syrian migrant crisis

How do you see the Syrian migrant crisis? Do you fear Europe will be overrun with benefit scroungers? Should the government be doing more or less to help? IS the situation out of control and beyond anything we can do? I hope we're not guilty of the NIMBY or Not In My Back Yard attitude but it is complex. Some people ask What Would Jesus Do – that's clear in the parable of the Good Samaritan because the need was immediate and obvious. By contrast the Syrian crisis is long term unclear and complex. Yet we can be guilty of never responding to humanitarian crises because they are so many and so deep.

A Prayer for the refuge crisis

[++ Justin Welby just tweeted a prayer for the refugee crisis as I write this]

Heavenly Father, you are the source of all goodness generosity and love. We thank you for opening the hearts of many to those who are fleeing for their lives. Help us now to open our arms in welcome, and reach out our hands in support. That the desperate

may find new hope, and lives torn apart be restored. WE ask this in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ Your Son our Lord, who fled persecution at His birth and at His last triumphed over death.

The exiled people in Isaiah's day needed God to restore their fortunes. God throughout history has intervened to bring order from chaos. In the beginning, darkness was overcome by light; from slavery in Egypt, the people were liberated into a land of milk and honey; in Jesus day lepers were healed, the blind were given their sight. And more recently Christian campaigners have ended slavery and built hospitals and orphanages. But the work isn't over.

One day my feeble eyesight won't need varifocals and Specsavers will go out of business. One day you won't need hearing aids, pace makers, zimmer frames. One day the lion will lie down with the lamb and the dispossessed will have a final home for eternity, blessed are the poor in spirit for they shall see God. One day there will be no more suffering no more death. In fact we are told that death will be the last enemy to be defeated by Jesus.

Until we see the final restoration of the world from the chaos we witness all around us today, we will need

spectacles. We will need the help of one another, even the love and compassion of a stranger at times- we are who we are waiting for, God will strengthen us to do the work to which he calls us – those with faith will work for the common good, those that have eyes to see God at work in the world – they will blossom and flourish and burst with life

Closing Refrain

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