

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ISAIAH
God's Overture to His people
Isaiah 1:1-31

'It was the best of times, it was the worst of times'. The opening lines of Charles Dickens' *A Tale of Two Cities* is an apt description of the commencement of Isaiah's prophetic ministry. The long reign of King Uzziah had seen the southern kingdom of Judah expand its territory and prosper materially. However, the fault lines of society preoccupied with material success and self-interest lay heavy upon Isaiah's heart and he responds accordingly.

The opening chapter of Isaiah may best be described as an overture to a prophetic symphony filled with exquisite theology, painful rebuke and astounding hope against a dark backdrop of a nation turning its back on God. Amidst the people's faithlessness, God remains faithful and calls Isaiah as his mouthpiece to call his people back to himself.

Isaiah grew to maturity in the midst of unprecedented prosperity, the greatest since the days of the united monarchy under David and Solomon. However, the things he witnessed revolted him: gross luxury, oppression of the poor, perversion of justice, lavish display of wealth, pride in military might, gross immorality, empty ritualism and open idolatry. So Isaiah takes the people to court. The entire chapter is cast in the form of a trial, with a court constituted before the cosmos. The heavens and the earth are the jury. God is plaintiff and judge. The people of Judah and Jerusalem are the defendants with the prophet the prosecutor.

The chapter's outline is as follows:

- i. The charge presented vv 2-9
 - rebellion on the part of God's children.
- ii. The people's defence vv 10-17
 - their elaborate ritual
- iii. The prospect of pardon proclaimed vv 18-23
 - God's love calls forth persistence, trust and obedience
- iv. The sentence pronounced
 - The ruin of sinners and redemption of a remnant

There is no finer example of prophetic oratory than this. Sin is a ghastly reality. God as a grieving parent, has lavished much love and demonstrated such care, yet his people have rebelled against him. Isaiah contrasts their rebellion with the faithfulness of domestic animals. What a devastating charge. Judah's behaviour has no parallel in the animal world.

Impressive ritual accomplished by the hollow hearts of those who practise religion devoid of reality – outwardly impressive but negated by their daily activity. The sin of the people is deep, the mercy of God deeper still. "Come now, let us settle the matter, says the Lord. Though your sins are like scarlet, they shall be white as snow" (v18). "I will thoroughly purge away your dross and remove all your impurities" (v25). As rebellious as Judah is, the Lord's love and compassion are greater still.

Alan Cameron
Trinity, Lynnwood
Sunday 7 May 2017