

"World peace" video from Miss Congeniality....

For many years in the west, we have taken a relative state of peace for granted, haven't we, which is why seeing something like that, which is a parody of what has actually happened at a beauty pageant, but it's why something like that makes you laugh.

But of course, 'world peace' is no laughing matter — and today, just like at other strategic times in history, there are legitimate reasons for concern.

We want a world of peace.
We need a world of peace.

But isn't this why the United Nations was formed after WWII?

The United Nations is an intergovernmental organisation whose stated purposes are to

- maintain international peace and security,
- develop friendly relations among nations,
- achieve international cooperation,
- and be a centre for harmonising the actions of nations.

Sounds brilliant.

In 2020 the UN recognised 75 years of existence and this video was produced to paint a picture of the future

Play video

Idealism is nice isn't it but only to an extent. Idealism is nothing without realism.

That's just one of the many things I love about the Scriptures, and about Christianity generally it paints a picture of humanity and our world, that is realistic, but it doesn't leave it there.

- It acknowledges sin,
- it acknowledges the problem that sin causes,
- and it shows us the great creator of the universe, who offers the solution.

God sent Jesus to enter the reality, to deal with it appropriately, and to bring into existence this NEW WORLD. A new world - coming.

Today is Advent Sunday. It's a day when the journey towards Christmas kind of officially starts in the Church.

It's often called the Church's New Year.

We're looking forward to remembering and celebrating Christ's first coming at Christmas, but it's also about realising the sombre reality of his second coming,

- and we wait carefully,
- reminding ourselves of the gravity of being a Christian,
- the serious nature of being a follower of Christ,
- and that judgement awaits.

Throughout Advent this year, we are spending four weeks in the prophet Isaiah. A prophet known for his realistic confrontation of the status quo, and telling it like it is.

Right throughout his 40 years of ministry, Isaiah was called to do an impossible task, to not only speak words of judgement, but to do it in such a way that closed the people's eyes and hearts to the message.

It seems that Isaiah came from a wealthier and more socially influential background than some other prophets and was clearly well educated and a trusted advisor of King Hezekiah.

It also seems that he was a trained writer/historian as 2 Chronicles 26:22 implies, and it could have been in that context that he began to function as a prophet. But he was also a poet and a politician.

The OT scholar and theologian, Walter Brueggemann, sees the task of a prophet like this:

'to tell the truth in a society that lives in illusion, grieve in a society that practises denial, and express hope in a society that lives in despair.'

As we read through Isaiah, especially these early chapters, we can see these things being done very clearly.

Isaiah is politically focussed as well as theologically focussed, and his words are incredibly relevant for our world today.

In chapter 2, Isaiah gives us two futures.
Two contrasting pictures of what the future might be like.

One of these futures is incredibly positive, and one very negative.

Each picture ends with a challenge to Israel.
Effectively saying,
"if this is what you want, this is what you need to do."
OR
"if this is what you don't want, this is what you need to do."

Positive future. Negative future. Your call.

It seems to me that Vladimir Putin needs to learn from history.

There was a time when his country, the former USSR had a different desire for the future to what he seems to have.

In 1959 the USSR gifted a sculpture to the UN.

The sculpture depicts the figure of a man, holding a hammer in one hand and sword in the other, hammering the sword into a ploughshare, a tool to till land for crops. This symbolises man's desire to put an end to war and transform tools of destruction into tools which benefit humankind. The sculpture is called 'Let us Beat Swords into Ploughshares'. The sculptor, Evgeniy Vuchetich, who died in 1974, was given the award, the 'People's Artist of the USSR'.

And not far away, in what is now called Peace Park, there is the Isaiah Wall, and on it is engraved the words of Isaiah 2:4 "They shall beat their swords into ploughshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more."

In chapter 2, vv 1-5, Isaiah gives us a picture of the positive future - God's ideal world.

It involves ALL nations.

All kinds of people and peoples will come from everywhere to worship Israel's God, the one who can teach them truth.

In this ideal world, the positive future, everyone will want to hear about God, they'll want to hear from God, and they'll want to hear God's truth, so that they can follow him.

If there are disputes, he will settle them. And the way he will settle them is by getting rid of weapons altogether.

That's what real world peace looks like.

Not the elusive aim of the military power being held by the good guys, rather than the bad guys.

And Isaiah's challenge for this to be reality is in v.5 - 'Let us walk in the light of the Lord'.

But this positive future is not where Isaiah stays. He then presents the negative future, which becomes clear very quickly, is turning out to be the actual future.

His anguish and anger comes out as he despairs about the dreadful future coming. His plea for people to walk in the light of the Lord, soon disappears as **this** reality, the negative future, takes over.

People are turning away from God and reaching for their idols, their superstitions, and their pagan customs. This means that God turns away from them because of that sin.

Isaiah says that when you bow down to the work of your own hands, you will be brought low, you will be humbled, and are not to be forgiven.

Arrogance and pride will be dealt with, and only the Lord alone will be exalted, not those who exalt themselves.

A society like this is not God's plan or desire.

It seems strange doesn't it, that a description from so long ago easily applies in our own society.

What do we see around us?

- The quick acceptance of fake news
- turning away from truth,
- the acknowledgement of any religion BUT the one that involves commitment to Jesus,
- the over importance given to wealth,
- the over dependence on military power
- and the excessive influence of self appointed elites.

Isaiah was saying that God is not going to allow the kind of society he was seeing, and it is pretty clear that God will call to account the things we are seeing today.

The challenge for us is to acknowledge the ungodly values in our own world and to wisely work out how to not be sucked in by them.

And the only way to be able to do that, is to see God as he **truly** is, and recognise how profoundly angered he is by sin, and especially by idolatry.

Those under this judgement will need to hide from the fearful presence of the Lord and the splendour of his majesty it says in v.10.

This is reiterated in vv 19 and v.21.

And these verses are interspersed with the great truth of how the world should be not idolatrous, but who is the One who should be worshipped and exalted?
Verses 11 and 17 tell us.

The Lord alone is to be exalted.

Tim Chester an English Christian commentator says:

"One danger is to think of God simply as a bigger or better version of ourselves. We assume God is like us, but with more power or greater moral consistency. We think of ourselves first and then make God in our likeness. That's the wrong way round. We only discover the truth about ourselves as we truly see God."

And Barry Webb in his commentary on this passage says this:

"Isaiah warns that the day of the Lord will be a day of terrible judgement for Judah in particular, but also for the whole world. Everything in which people have trusted instead of trusting in the living God will be brought down: trees and mountains, fortifications, ships and money. Even religion will prove worthless on that day if it is man-made, for man-made religion is the supreme expression of human arrogance. It is an attempt to bend God to our will by remaking him in our own image."

Isaiah warns that the day of the Lord is the day of ultimate judgement. When we are confronted with that, the question that needs answering is this - where are we placing our ultimate trust?

Do we trust in God?
or do we trust in ourselves?
in other words - pride?

So friends, how does this peace truly come?
What is the answer?
what has God done to bring about the positive future, rather than the negative future?

When we take the appropriate time to reflect on this, it is clear that there can never be peace without justice.

God brings peace WITH justice in the most remarkable way.

Alongside Isaiah today, we also read Hebrews 1:1-4, which shows us who it is that is the true radiance of God's glory, and is both the means and the end.

"In the past God spoke to our ancestors through the prophets at many times and in various ways, but in these last days he has spoken to us by his Son whom he appointed heir of all things, and through whom also he made the universe. The Son is the radiance of God's glory and the exact representation of his being, sustaining all things by his powerful word. "

World peace is possible. But only on God's terms and by his plan.
Amen