

## Sermon – Easter 6, 9<sup>th</sup> May 2021 St James & podcast

Isaiah 55:1-11

### God's Kingdom

It seems thoughts have been turning to holidays this week following the Government's announcement that some foreign travel is likely to be allowed from 17 May, and I see the Canary Islands is on the list. Many years ago Corinna and I booked a holiday abroad to Gran Canaria. It was the days before the internet and we wanted to we get an idea of where we could go so we took home a couple of travel agent's brochures. In the brochure there were sandy beaches, a pool and a nearly new hotel. How different it looked when we got there in person! As we looked more closely at the brochure, the people in it were in 1970s clothing, wing collar shirts and paisley blouses. The freshly painted hotel in the brochures was indeed freshly painted....just in the 1970s. It felt like we'd signed up for something different from what it turned out to be - the reality fell short of the promise.

By contrast our Bible reading from Isaiah 55 gives us a glimpse of the kingdom God builds. These are not the dubious commitments made to get you to sign up for the package deal. This is an insight into God's kingdom, which we glimpse in part on this earth but will see more fully in heaven, and it gives us hope when we face the fragility of this human life. Isaiah prophesies it is place where those who have no money can *'come buy and eat'* (v1) and where our *'souls will be delighted on the richest of fares'* (v2). At first it sounds a bit like those

travel brochure claims – until we consider the person whose promise backs them up. Isaiah tells us that the Lord himself makes this everlasting covenant with us (v3). Over the past few weeks we've been gaining an insight into the person who makes this covenant with us. We've seen he is like the Shepherd who willingly lays down his life for flock, becoming the gate across the entrance to the sheep fold, to protect and nurture his flock. He can be compared to a vine in which we can become rooted and connected, and flourish as the people he calls us to be. It is this same loving God who makes these covenantal promises to us. We could spend a lifetime searching and being disappointed in the fickle promises of human society: Politics, monarchy, business, personal relationships – all contain moments of hope but over time, disappoint. The only true and lasting hope is in Jesus Christ. He connects the Old Testament to the New, holding our past and our future in his hands. He invites us to respond to his covenant of love which he freely extends to each of us, no matter who we are or what we have done. Yes, there may be things we need to turn away from, just like that verse in Isa 55:7 *'let him turn to the Lord and he will have mercy upon him, to our God, for he will freely pardon.'*

So what can we take from Isaiah 55 that helps us as Christians today? In our modern society, we are so used to our relationships being governed by contract, that it's hard to envisage any alternative. Yet Isaiah 55 reminds us that in God's kingdom, relationships are governed through *covenants*, not *contracts*. There are three areas in which a covenant is different from a contract, and fortunately for us they all begin with 'P'!

1. A covenant is a **Promise**, an obligation that is voluntarily entered into. Often one party is in a stronger position than the other, but instead of using that to exact the best bargaining position as you would in a contract, in a covenant the stronger part helps the weaker party to fulfil their promises. In other words, while contracts are about 'Me and You'; covenants are about 'Us.'
2. Before becoming ordained, I spent 25 years in business, and at one time, a major financial institution I consulted for wanted to install a new computer system. We had a tender and assessment process that whittled down the number of suppliers and if they successfully passed then there would come the detailed negotiations about the contract: who was going to do what and when; what penalty would arise if they didn't; how much it would cost, and the contract could be broken if they didn't deliver. By contrast a covenant is **Permanent**. There are no break clauses, for God still stands by his side even though we may frequently fall short on ours. He does this because he looks into our hearts and loves us for who we are and for what we can be. His covenant is everlasting and even endures beyond death. Sometimes in our human relationships God provides insight into heavenly matters, or as Ecclesiastes 3:11 puts it, God has '*placed eternity in the hearts of men*'. In the covenantal sacrament of marriage, we glimpse the eternal nature of God's love, for we know that we continue to love a person even beyond the point of death.
3. Covenant is **Personal**. A contract gives one thing for another, while a covenant is the giving oneself to the other. Think back to the illustration of the vine, where we can be rooted in Christ who willingly gave himself for us. Or that example of the shepherd, willingly laying himself down for the good of his flock, each of whom he knows by name. St Paul described it as having '*our names written in the book of life*' (Phil 4:3). These aren't the sometime vacuous promises of a travel agent's holiday brochures, they are promises made by a covenant-making God whose love extends to us individually and eternally.

And when our relationships are rooted in covenant, they become a mirror through which the world sees God. Amen.

[Finish with notice about 'THY KINGDOM COME' 13-23 MAY]