

## Sermon – 27/11/2011 pm

### Word, Wisdom and Worship

Study Text: Isaiah 29:11-14

Josiah was eight years old when he became king and he reigned 31 years in Jerusalem. He reigned after the time of Isaiah. What was interesting about Josiah was that while repairing the temple they 'found the Book of the Law in the house of the Lord' (II Kings 22:8). When it was read to the king he said '*great is the wrath of the Lord ... because our fathers have not obeyed the words of this book*' (II Kings 22:13).

Josiah went on to restore true worship in Jerusalem, worship according to what was written in this book. He ordered the Passover to be kept as commanded in this book. He put away the mediums and spiritists, all the idols and every abomination in Judah and Jerusalem. So ended a period of great darkness in the land.

The history of the church tells the same story, namely that when the word of God is closed darkness comes upon the land. Prior to the Reformation of the sixteenth century people other than priests were discouraged from reading the Bible – in fact the Church of Rome punished any person found to be reading the Bible without permission. The people were kept in the dark.

Wycliffe believed the Bible should be read by all people. When he translated the Bible from Latin into English in 1382 he faced intense opposition from the church. He was declared to be a heretic and his books to be burned. The Pope later ordered his bones to be dug up and burned in the fire. It is appropriate that this period of history is called the Dark Ages.

#### 1. Words of a Book

Isaiah like Jeremiah was a writing prophet. He wrote down the words the Lord gave to him in visions (2:1). Isaiah speaks of the 'whole vision', of all the prophecies given to him being in a book or scroll (29:11, 12). In the providence of God they were written down so that people could later see how the words were fulfilled.

In the first instance the prophecies were to be read or listened to by his contemporaries. If the people listened they would learn what God was doing and what God was about to do. If they listened and obeyed they would have repented and returned to the Lord. They would have avoided the suffering that was coming upon them (1:10).

The words of the Lord, however, had become like a sealed book or scroll. Writing in those days was on a scroll that was rolled up and sealed with a lump of clay. Isaiah pictures the book being given to a literate person to read. But this person says 'I cannot for it is sealed' (29:11).

It is not the piece of clay that is the problem of course – it is the blindness that covers his heart. He has no desire to listen to the word of God. Men will open and read all manner of books and magazines that stimulate his corrupt and perverse heart, but not the book of divine truth.

We mentioned Wycliffe translating the Bible into the language of the people. While he was doing this others were teaching the people how to read. Schools were started for the purpose of teaching people to read the Bible. We have fallen a long way to the present day when some want to ban reading the Bible in schools.

Millions of people are still illiterate. They have not had the opportunity to go to school. Missionaries are engaged in literacy programs with the aim of enabling people to read the Bible. A poor lady who heard the gospel and believed in Jesus was illiterate. We would read to her and teach her verses from the Bible. We were told later that she prayed to the Lord and can now read.

If you can read why are you not reading this precious book? All your education is a waste if you fail to use it to read this book. Moreover, if you have opportunity to help someone read please do so. Help them to read the most important book in the world, the Holy Bible.

## 2. Worship in Spirit

*Therefore the Lord said (29:13).* The Lord had a final word for the blind, rebellious people of Jerusalem. He clearly describes the nature of their sin. *'They honour me with their lips, but their hearts are far from me'* (29:13). They were bringing their sacrifices and offerings to the temple. They were going through the motions of worship but their hearts were unmoved. It was just a ritual, a formal display for all to see and make them feel good. The Book was not the standard for worship. No one could or would read it, remember!

Jesus confronted the formalism in worship in his day. He confronted people whose worship was based on tradition and not on the Scriptures. He confronted people very concerned about outward aspects of worship but not in the least concerned about matters of the heart, matters like love, repentance and forgiveness. Their mouths were open to sing and to pray. They loved to stand and pray long prayers with lots of repetition, but it was vanity not sincerity.

Jesus confronted people for whom worship was all about law keeping. Order in worship is important but with these people the laws they were following were the laws of men. They were following the traditions of the elders (Matthew 15:2). They were concerned about washing of hands and bowls, about food and about dress and about keeping the Sabbath. Jesus reminded them that what goes into the body does not defile, but what comes out. It is from the heart that evil thoughts proceed, and wicked behaviour follows (Matthew 15:19).

Jesus made it clear to the woman at the well that true worshipers must worship in spirit and truth. We must be sincere and not hypocritical as we come to worship. We must come with humility, examining our hearts, not our dress. We must draw near in faith, opening our heart to the word and the Spirit of God. *'Draw near to God and he will draw near to you. Cleanse your hands you sinners and purify your hearts you double minded'* (James 4:8).

We spoke of the Dark Ages in the history of the church when the Bible was kept from the common people. Church tradition was given greater authority than the Bible at that time. Whenever this happens in any church, worship will be corrupted. It was like this in Isaiah's day and in Josiah's day. It was like this in Jesus' day. It was like this prior to the Reformation. It is like this today. Ultimate authority must always be given to the Scriptures. *'The word of God contained in the Scriptures of the Old and New Testaments, is the only rule to direct us how we may glorify and enjoy him (God)'* (Shorter Catechism, Question 2).

## 3. Wonderful Work

The Lord said through the prophet *'I will again do a marvellous work ... and a wonder'* (29:14). What was this marvellous work? Why the 'again'? The Lord had delivered them before when they were slaves in Egypt. That was a mighty work of God but it was a physical deliverance from a physical bondage.

What these people needed was spiritual deliverance, deliverance from sin. These people – not my people, notice – were blind and their hearts were hard. They were a people burdened by sin. They needed One who would deliver them from sin and death.

This marvellous work spoken of by Isaiah must surely be the work of Jesus in the cross and resurrection. Isaiah was pointing to a new exodus, a greater exodus, which he goes on to describe in chapter 53. *By his knowledge my righteous Servant will justify many, for he shall bear their iniquities* (Isaiah 53:11).

This marvellous work will not be in accord with the wisdom of this world. In fact it will be hidden from those who consider themselves wise (29:14). Jesus may have had Isaiah's words in mind when he rejoiced with the seventy after they returned from their mission. He prayed, thanking the Lord that he had hidden these things from the wise and prudent and revealed them to babes (Luke 10:21). The life-saving truth of the gospel is revealed to those of child-like faith.

The apostle Paul quotes Isaiah's words in his letter to the church at Corinth (I Corinthians 1:19). The heart of human beings had not changed after 800 years. There were still those who seek after wisdom, namely the Greeks or Gentiles. Paul found such people in Athens talking about the latest theories and philosophies. Worldly wisdom is highly prized by worldly people – but not heavenly wisdom.

Paul spoke to the men at Athens about the marvellous work of Jesus of Nazareth whom God raised from the dead. Some people mocked (Acts 17:32). There were mockers at Corinth also, men who were wise by worldly standards but fools in the eyes of God. Paul preached Christ crucified a message of foolishness to the Gentiles but the message of salvation to those who believe.

The astronomer who shared in the Nobel Prize for physics was asked in an interview about the origin of the universe. He replied that he was not religious and would not speculate on such matters. We might applaud his honesty as a scientist. But we regret the media, and many such people, who run off to academics with questions about life and truth when they have no more knowledge about such matters than the man in the street – or child in the church.

*'I will destroy the wisdom of the wise and bring to nothing the understanding of the prudent'* said the prophet (29:14). The Son of God said that God had revealed the truth to babes.

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