

Isaiah 64: 1-9 & Mark 13: 24-37 – *Rend the heavens*
Online sermon for 29 November 2020 by Rev Phil Wootton

Large parts of the Bible were written out of times of crisis. From the intensity of experience, the Bible writers discovered extraordinary new insights. As we go through our time of crisis, are we ready to discover something fresh about God's ways?

'Oh, that you would rend the heavens and come down!' the prophet implored of the almighty. 'Our situation is awful. God, come and sort it out.' The book of Isaiah is long and complex, challenging and glorious. It spans a period of around 200 years and multiple crises, during which the people repeatedly cried out to God in agony against forces beyond their own control – against superpowers Assyria and Babylon, against war, famine, disease and death, against dislocation, destruction and exile. The prophet speaks a consistent message through it all, of the holy God who calls his people to righteousness and justice, who expects repentance from his people as well as from their oppressors, and who brings extraordinary hope for the future.

- Out of the crisis of the Assyrian siege, dismantling their enemy's taunts and sending their army packing, the God of Israel demonstrates he's more powerful than any other god.
- Out of the Babylonian exile, using foreign kings as instruments of his will, the God of Israel demonstrates he is the God of all the world.
- Nevertheless, returned from exile, the people find the home they longed for is not all they'd imagined: the city is still in ruins, the Temple a burnt out shell, and foreigners still in charge. Once again they cry out: 'Rend the heavens, O God, and come down.' Out of the anguish, comes new insight: God's extraordinary promise (Isaiah 65: 17): 'Behold, I will create new heavens and new earth ... and I will create Jerusalem to be a delight.'

Some five or six hundred years later, St Mark's Gospel, most scholars agree, was written out of another time of crisis. The Jewish Rebellion against Roman rule led up to yet another siege of Jerusalem, destruction of its walls, scattering of its people, looting of its treasures, and dismantling of its Temple. It felt like the end of the world. Christians remembered Jesus' prophecies (spoken some 40 years earlier) of world-shattering events, which he expressed poetically as the sun and moon darkened, the stars falling from the sky. They remembered how, the disciples had looked over from the Mount of Olives and admired the Temple, and how Jesus turned their admiration into this prophecy of destruction, adding in war and rumour of war, persecution and violence, family division and desolation.

So now, 40 years later, when they witnessed the Roman legions come and do their worst, crushing the historic hopes of Israel under the rubble, they knew Jesus' words had come true. One man went further: as it were, looking through the fog of war and the blaze of burning buildings, St Mark is inspired to write the whole story of the unknown rabbi from a Galilean backwater whose pretensions seemed to all the world to have been ended on a Roman cross; who is now vindicated by God as the long prophesied Son of Man, risen into

the clouds, reigning in glory, judging the world, and sending messengers to announce his rule across the earth. The cataclysm is not the end: it's the beginning of the good news, the kingdom announcement, the Gospel of Mark.

Large parts of the Bible were written in or about times of crisis. Out of the intensity of the crisis, the Bible writers discovered extraordinary new insights. As we go through our time of crisis, can we discover more about God's ways? First of all, we are not wrong to shout out, 'Rend the heavens and come down.' We are not wrong to express all our feelings – fear and frustration, anger and worry – before God, and demand he make a change. This is the Biblical practice of lament, heard so often in the Psalms as well as in the Prophets. It holds the love and mercy of God in the same picture as the awfulness of the circumstances, and refuses to let go. In fact, I suspect that until we have spoken with such intensity and agony in lament, we may not be ready to learn, to repent, and to discover new thing God is doing.

Secondly, worship. Like Mark recognising the 'Son of Man', like Isaiah discovering his is the God of the whole world, so we need to expand our horizons about God. It's through worship we grasp more of the greatness of God. But that leaves us with a problem: worship normally involves singing hymns; words and tune together lift our hearts and minds to God. But this leaves us with a problem: we've not been allowed to sing together for many months. The only answer is to make an extra effort of our own to find words, music, images or other forms of inspiration. Try for a start other Isaiah passages, like chapter 40: *'Do you not know? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He will not grow tired or weary, and his understanding no one can fathom. He gives strength to the weary and increases the power of the weak... They will soar on wings like eagles. They will run and not grow weary. They will walk and not be faint.'*

Thirdly, vision. Worship of our great God leads us to vision of and for his great world. A crisis tends to make us narrow our vision as we focus on our own problems. Our thoughts become claustrophobically stuck within our own four walls. Let's lift our eyes to the wonder and majesty of creation, to the extraordinary fruit of scientific research, and to the realms of future possibility. Then be honest: recognise the crises we face – Coronavirus, climate change, injustice – are global crises requiring global solutions. That's not a reason to despair but to seek out co-operation and partnership. Share Isaiah's vision of justice and righteousness together for all, of the renewal of all creation, and the holy God making all things new.

'Rend the heavens, and come down,' the prophet cried. In the crisis we continually pray for God's intervention in whatever form that might take. We know when God did 'rend the heavens,' actually, Jesus, the eternal Word, slipped in quietly, conceived of the Holy Spirit, born of a woman, in a backstreet stable. He came to shine a light. He came to work on the inside, within individuals and amongst his people, to transform the future of the world. In the season of Advent, we prepare to celebrate his first coming, and look up for the signs of his kingdom even in and through, as well as beyond, our time of crisis.