

## 24.10 21 Bible Sunday: Isaiah 55: 1-11 – Invited and Called – Rev Lin Vawer

This Sunday is designated as Bible Sunday. During lockdown Bibles in churches have been carefully stored away for fear of how they may carry the virus. Thankfully, we have access to our Bibles at home and on the internet.

How can we have church without the Bible? How can we do life without the Bible?

Without the Bible it would be difficult to worship God. The Bible shows us what God is like and there is no other book that can speak so powerfully into our lives. Without the Bible it would be difficult to hear from God or to learn about him or about our purpose in the world.

In the Bible passage we're going to look at today we're going to find people coming out of something, Isaiah 55 has a message for exiles returning home.

Has there been a moment this year when you experienced something resembling normal? What was it? Perhaps it was the gym, jumping on the bus, a shopping trip in town, meeting a friend for coffee. A few weeks ago I went on a train to Shrewsbury to meet a friend. We had a coffee, went for lunch, went in shops. I felt a bit of normality. You may have had a similar feeling.

We have experienced a kind of exile but nothing like the exile Israel experienced. Theirs had lasted 70 years. 70 years away from any kind of normality; 70 years away from away from home; and worst of all, 70 years away from the temple – from the presence of God.

Isaiah 55 is written for Israel's return. But what were they feeling? Disappointed? Fearful? Hurt? Perhaps, done with God? After all, where had he been in the middle of all this?

Is that how we are feeling like, coming out of exile? Perhaps we may be just relieved that there are little signs of normality, ready to tentatively make some first steps to get on with things again. But if we're honest, we might be feeling disappointed, hurt or full of fear. Perhaps we're feeling fed up, feeling like giving up, or questioning where God has been in all of this.

Israel's experience of exile is in some ways like ours – but there is an invitation within the Bible which, if we respond to it, can change everything.

We are invited to "come" no proviso attached just – come.

**The invitation is to all who are 'thirsty'.** They are those who thirst for more, for a life without the pains of emptiness, to those who thirst for love – and keep looking in all the wrong places. They are those who thirst for justice in their own lives and in the life of the world. What's more it's those who 'have no money' who are invited to the banquet, the outsider, the one who feels they have nothing to offer; the one who feels they've been forgotten. You don't have to qualify or measure up in some way. This banquet is free.

**The invitation is to all those who labour.** The prophet is in tune with those who are working themselves into the ground without seeing any lasting results. This may be our experience too. If we are working to be a success, to matter, to be liked, we're invited to stop.

**The invitation is from Jesus.** Jesus is God coming good on his word. Jesus is God bringing this water of real life to the world again. Jesus is God's faithful love and covenant with skin and flesh on

**The invitation is to the water of life.**

To a people that would have known the Bible story, this would have really hit home. In the beginning God made a beautiful world with a beautiful garden a place for people to live and work and worship him. There a

river flowed, bringing life to all. By Genesis 3, we see humans rebelling and turning from God. This is our human condition – to do away with God. There is a deep drought within us all and it leaves us in the wilderness.

But God doesn't give up. Throughout the biblical story, there are many moments where God continues to rescue and meet his people's needs – often at places of water. God provides at wells (like Jacob), through springs in the desert (like Hagar) or oases in the wilderness (as he did for Israel in the Exodus). All these stories show us how radically committed God is to his people despite their rebellion. This is his covenant – his promise. God says: 'Regardless of how you've treated me, I will never forsake you. I am going to love you to the end and bring you back.' To a people coming out of exile, God says: 'Don't stop believing! My covenant is everlasting'.

As Jesus died on the cross, he said, 'I am thirsty!'. Of course, Jesus was physically thirsty, but he also said this as a symbol of what the cross was achieving. He thirsted so we don't have to. He took on our death, so we can have his life. He was exiled, so we can come home. He was abandoned, so that we can know love.

A love like this means we can come out of exile – despite all the uncertainty we face – secure in the knowledge that we are loved, and we can stop trying to fill our emptiness, trying to prove ourselves and endlessly labouring.

But God never invites in without calling out. The very invitation we accept becomes our call. It is a pattern we see through the whole Bible.

God tells Abraham that he would bless him, and that he should go and be a blessing to others. He reveals himself to Moses in the burning bush, then tells him to go to Pharaoh. And Jesus said, 'As the Father has sent me, I am sending you'.

So, what is our call?

Israel's call was to go to the nations that did not know God and call on them to turn and run to him so that they too might live. We've been called to invite others to what we ourselves were invited into.

And as we come out of our exile, the invitation has never been more needed or more relevant. The Israelites were people returning from exile. They were battered, bruised, and filled with doubt and fear – surely not a people fit for sending!

But the call of God doesn't wait for those who are already strong, capable and confident. It comes to us in our weakness, and in our doubt and fear. And if we're sensing that we're not ready – not good enough for sending – God has us right where he wants us, where he can give us his own courage. God says "I will accomplish what I desire."

We need to hear that promise if we are to become a courageous church. Courage that doesn't deny fear, but it says there is something greater than fear

Imagine if we as the Church refused to let fear have the last word. Imagine what would happen in our communities and in our world if we really had this sort of faith in God's unfailing word, and if we really were willing to accept God's call.

It's all there in the Bible and its powerful stuff. Maybe before we even open it we should prepare ourselves first – put on our crash hat. Strap ourselves into our chair and be prepared for what it is saying to us.

And perhaps we should be less fearful about how our Bibles may transmit the virus and more concerned about the power the Bible can have on our lives today and resolve to be hearers of the word, readers of the word and doers of the word.