

Isaiah 35.1–10

The Highway

Amington St Editha

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Advent 2

The road to nowhere

So we are on the second week of Advent, looking at some of the prophecies about Jesus that we hear at a traditional carol service. Last week we looked at Micah talking about the coming king as a shepherd. This week we heard Isaiah talking about a *highway*.

When I was interviewed for the job of Vicar of Amington – spoiler alert, I got it – one of the amusing moments of the day came during our tour of the parish. Geoff led the way, showing us different schools and other local features – and then he took us to see Brindley Drive, better known as the road that goes nowhere, in Amington Fields. Perhaps with the new estate on the Golf Course the Council will find someone to pay for it to be finished now!

Thinking about roads this week gave me the perfect excuse to crack out some of my road jokes, mostly involving chickens.

Why did the rubber chicken cross the road?

She wanted to stretch her legs.

Why did the chicken cross the playground?

To get to the other slide.

Why did the horse cross the road?

It was the chicken's day off.

What happened when the elephant crossed the road?

It stepped on a chicken.

What happened when the vicar told one too many jokes?

Let's not find out shall we?

Today we are thinking about roads – one **highway** in particular: **the Way of Holiness** (8). Excited? I don't know what it is about holiness, but if I'm honest it doesn't sound like much fun. The Way of Fast Cars – that sounds like fun. The Way of Shoe Shops, if you're that way inclined. The Way of Tea and Cake?

It may not sound like fun, but unlike the road to nowhere in Amington Fields, **the Way of Holiness** has a destination: a place of **everlasting joy**, where **sorrow and sighing will flee away** (10). That sounds like a place I'd like to be.

Judgement

Now, reading the Bible in church is a good thing to do. I hope that's not a controversial to say! The Bible contains all things necessary for salvation – in other words, it contains everything we need to believe. So it is important that we trust what it says. And, it is important that we trust it as a whole – in other words, not only the 'nice' bits, or our favourite passages.

Sometimes the way we read the Bible in church doesn't help with that, because we tend to pick the bits that are easier to hear and read, and leave the rest.

This morning's reading is a case in point: it has some wonderful and comforting words in it: **the desert and the parched land will be glad** (1); **then will the lame leap like a deer** (6); **the redeemed... will enter Zion with singing** (9-10).

But it comes in the context of God's words of judgement: **the Lord is angry with all nations... he will totally destroy them** (34.2); **the Lord has a day of vengeance, a year of retribution** (34.8).

We need to hear both these things. It may be uncomfortable, but we must pay attention to *everything* Scripture says, or we will end up creating a religion to suit ourselves, instead of following God.

God is the Shepherd King, and that means two things: (1) he will judge all those who reject his rule, and (2) he knows what is best for us, his flock. So we would do well to listen.

We Need God

Last week, in Micah, we saw how God is the Shepherd, and we are his sheep. Isaiah wasn't much more complimentary about God's people than Micah – look how in v3 he says God's people have **feeble hands, knees that give way** (3), and **fearful hearts** (4).

In other words, we're in a bit of a mess, and there isn't anything we can do about it. Like a blind man cannot make himself see, like a deaf woman cannot make herself hear, like lame people cannot make themselves leap – so there is nothing we can do. We are stuck in the **desert**, the **parched land**, the **wilderness** (1).

However God isn't done with us yet.

I have to say, I don't really understand why sometimes we shy away from the bits of the Bible that are about God's judgement on sin. You know what, I *deserve* it. I have turned my back on the God who made me. I have, in ignorance and stupid pride, told the creator of all that I know how to live my life better than he does. That is the reality of sin, and I – we all – deserve God's judgement.

However God isn't done with us yet.

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened
and the ears of the deaf unstopped.

Then will the lame leap like a deer,
and the mute tongue shout for joy.

Water will gush forth in the wilderness
and streams in the desert.

Isaiah 35.5-6 (NIV)

God knows that we can't do any of that ourselves. He knows we are in a mess, but he loves us too much to leave us in it.

So he will do for us what we can't do for ourselves: make us see, hear and leap with joy. You know what, friends, I can't wait for that day! All those who have been **redeemed** and **rescued** by God (9-10) will finally see him face-to-face, we will know him and worship him forever. The **Way of Holiness** may not – at first – sound like fun, but it is the way to perfect and **everlasting joy** (10).

I can't wait for that day – but I have to. Sadly I'm stuck here with you lot...! One of the problems the early church had to contend with is exactly that: what should we do while we wait for Jesus to return? They looked to passages like this one for clues.

The Highway

When Peter answered that very question in his second letter, he wrote this:

You ought to live holy and godly lives as you look forward to the day of God... make every effort to be found spotless, blameless and at peace with him.

2 Peter 3.11-12, 14 (NIV)

The Bible tells us to be **holy and godly**, every bit as much as it tells us to love one another. In fact, living **holy and godly lives** is *how* we should love God, the world and one another, because that is how Jesus modelled God's love for us. In the Bible, love doesn't mean being 'true to yourself'. That's Shakespeare, not Scripture.

In the Bible, love means costly obedience and sacrifice. In the Bible, love is unselfish, un-self-serving, un-self-centred. Love has nothing to do with greed, and everything to do with living **holy and godly lives**, in response to God's love for us.

Back to Isaiah 35, to the vision of God's healed people. They are on a road, a road that is heading somewhere – to **Zion**, the city of God (10). The road to Zion is called the **Way of Holiness** (8).

Here's some more difficult teaching.

And a highway will be there;
it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.
The unclean will not journey on it;
wicked fools will not go about on it.

Isaiah 35.8 (NIV)

The **Way of Holiness** is so-called because *only* holy people may walk on it. Only people who make the grade of holiness, are able to walk on God's **highway**, safe from **any ravenous beast** (9).

Well, that rules us out.

Except, if you've been listening to my preaching since I arrived, you'll know that's the wrong way round. Walking on **the Way of Holiness** is how we *respond* to God, not how we *earn* his favour. Look in v10: **those the Lord has rescued will return**. They didn't rescue themselves, any more than we can.

God does the saving; we do the living. *Repeat*

Advent is a time, like Lent, for us to take stock of our lives, and prepare ourselves for Jesus' return, to make sure he finds us waiting patiently, living **holy and godly lives** – not to earn his love, but *because* he *already* loves us.

Let's make sure we are on the right road. Let's make sure we aren't on a road that goes nowhere good, but instead come to God, say sorry for our sins and the mess of our lives, beg his forgiveness, and then walk *together* on **the Way of Holiness**: doing our best, making **every effort** to **live holy and godly lives**..

That is how the Bible says we should wait for Jesus' return.