

Isaiah 55

The invitation, our call

You might still remember the first moment you experienced something resembling normal this year. What was it? Perhaps it was the gym, jumping on the bus, a shopping trip in town, meeting a friend for coffee. Whatever it was, there was probably the feeling: 'We're finally coming out of this.'

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

Israel's exile had lasted 70 years. That was 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?

If this sounds familiar, it's because it's a common human experience. Theologian Andrew Ollerton says: 'Exile is more than just an event in the Bible. It's a deep metaphor that explains a universal condition that we still experience today.'

So, what are you like coming out of exile? Perhaps you may be just relieved this is all done, and ready 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 like giving up, or already have. Perhaps we're done with God, or questioning where he's 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.

1. The Invitation

¹ *Come, all you who are thirsty,
come to the waters;
and you who have no money,
come, buy and eat!*

*Come, buy wine and milk
without money and without cost.*

² *Why spend money on what is not bread,
and your labour on what does not satisfy?
Listen, listen to me, and eat what is good,
and you will delight in the richest of fare.*

³ *Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.*

*I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.*

(Isaiah 55.1–3, NIV)

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. Furthermore, it's those who 'have no money' who are invited to the banquet. In Hebrew thinking this could mean the poor, but also the outsider. It's not just the one who doesn't know when the next pay cheque is arriving, but it's 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 in order to be a success, to matter, to be liked, we're invited to stop.

The invitation is to life. Verse 3 says:

*Give ear and come to me;
listen, that you may live.*

*I will make an everlasting covenant with you,
my faithful love promised to David.*

To a people that would have known the Bible story, this would have really hit home. Go back to the beginning of the story. God made a beautiful world and in it a beautiful garden – a place for people to live and work and worship him. There a river flowed, bringing life to all. Turn the page, and 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.'

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.

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.

And in John 7.37 he says: 'Let anyone who is thirsty come to me and drink'. His promise really is for anyone and everyone.

Some of us might find it hard to accept an invitation like that. We might struggle to think we could be loved. We live in a world of flaky and fragile relationships, where it's easy for us to be cancelled if we do or say one wrong thing, or dropped if we don't make the grade. We might think that God is the same. 'Will he cancel me? Will he drop me? Does he realise who he's really inviting?' But God isn't like that.

*'For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
neither are your ways my ways,'
declares the Lord.*

⁹*'As the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.'*

(Isaiah 55.8–9, NIV)

In these verses he is saying, I don't respond like you. My love is not like your love. I am not like the other people in your life. I cannot go back on my word. You simply don't have a way of measuring or even understanding the sheer depth and width and height of my 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. We can stop trying to fill our emptiness, trying to prove ourselves and endlessly labouring. We can rest, in the knowledge that we will always be loved.

This is the invitation.

2. Our call

But God never invites in without calling out. The very invitation we enter into becomes our call. This 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'. (John 20.21, NIV)

So, what is our call?

⁵ Surely you will summon nations you know not,
and nations you do not know will come
running to you,
because of the Lord your God,
the Holy One of Israel,
for he has endowed you with splendor.”

⁶ Seek the Lord while he may be found;
call on him while he is near.

⁷ Let the wicked forsake their ways
and the unrighteous their thoughts.
Let them turn to the Lord, and he will have
mercy on them,
and to our God, for he will freely pardon.

(Isaiah 55.5–7, NIV)

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. After all, this was a 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.

¹⁰ As the rain and the snow
come down from heaven,
and do not return to it
without watering the earth
and making it bud and flourish,
so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for
the eater,

¹¹ so is my word that goes out from my mouth:
It will not return to me empty,
but will accomplish what I desire
and achieve the purpose for which I sent it.

(Isaiah 55.10–11, NIV)

The promises of God are as sure and certain as

the rain that falls from the sky. Just as it brings new life and growth, so will the word of God. This is what God says to a fearful Israel coming out of exile, and he says the same to us today: ‘My word will not fail. Take heart.’

This is a promise we need to hear, because fear plays such a massive role in our lives and we’re so easily discouraged by our own fearfulness. You might have dreamed a dream, or felt a conviction that you could make a difference, only to be prevented by fear. Fear is natural.

Courage, though, is a choice – and the world needs a courageous Church. Courage doesn’t deny fear, but it says that fear isn’t the only thing there – there is something greater. The people returning from exile need to hear that God’s word will not return to him empty.

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 on our lives.

In closing

Ephesians 2.10 says, ‘For we are God’s handiwork, created in Christ Jesus to do good works, which God prepared in advance for us to do.’

Just like the unique touch ID that allows you into your phone, God has uniquely shaped and wired you, your experiences, your language, your background, to make you the key to touching and transforming other people’s lives. As the American theologian Tim Keller says: ‘There are some needs only you can see. There are some hands only you can hold. There are some people only you can reach.’

So have you responded to the invitation? May God give you courage as the invitation you’ve accepted becomes your call.

