

The End in Sight: Isaiah 66:18-24

Introduction

"And I, because of their actions and their imaginations, am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory" (v18). Over 1.2 billion people watched the 2003 World Cup cricket games. 2 billion people watched France beat Brazil in the football final of the 1998 FIFA World Cup. 3.5 billion people watched the Sydney Olympics on TV. Even more watched 2006 World Cup Soccer. Not everybody is interested in sport. But disaster hooks people to their TV screens. Billions of people witnessed the destruction of the twin towers in New York on September 11.

1. Messengers: International News

Even in this high tech world no event has ever caught the attention of the entire globe. But God will do just that. He explains, *"I will set a sign among them"* (v19a). Isaiah 66 is about God himself coming and revealing his glory - that's the sign. But Isaiah did not know how this would be fulfilled by God. Jesus spoke about *"the sign of the Son of Man."* Ultimately, this occurs when Jesus returns in his glory: *"Look, he is coming with the clouds, and every eye will see him, even those who pierced him"* (Rev 1:7). But John also says, *"The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father, full of grace and truth"* (Jn 1:14). This fulfils Isaiah 7:14: *"Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign: The virgin will be with child and will give birth to a son, and will call him Immanuel"*, that is, "God with us." This is the great sign of God, the greatest event in history, the event that one day will catch the attention of the entire world - God present in all his glory.

People are attracted to enter the kingdom of God when they see the sign, when they see in the lives of God's people clear evidence that Jesus is present with them; when they see evidence of the wonderful effects of Jesus' rule in the lives of God's people. When I moved to Christchurch I went to live in the YMCA hostel. There was a group of dedicated Christians in that hostel. They were ordinary people, but there was something attractive about their lives. The way they related to one another drew me to them. What I was seeing, as I now know, was the evidence of God's presence with them. The Lord himself was living and moving among them. I could see the sign and it pointed me to the Lord.

How will the people of the world come to hear about the extraordinary coming of God? Through international news broadcasts. God will send out news broadcasters to all parts of the world: *"I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations - to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant lands that have not heard of my fame or seem my glory. They will proclaim my glory among the nations"* (v19). We are called to broadcast the news to the people of all nations that God has come in the person of Christ and set his sign among the nations - the sign of Immanuel, "God with us." To see Jesus is to see God in his glory. In Isaiah 11:10 Isaiah prophesies, *"In that day the Root of Jesse will stand as a banner for the peoples; the nations will rally to him, and his place of rest will be glorious."*

But in Isaiah 66 this world news broadcast concerns a disaster of monumental proportions. Look at verses 15-16: *"See, the Lord is coming with fire, and his chariots are like a whirlwind; he will bring down his anger with fury, and his rebuke with flames of fire. For with fire and with his sword the Lord will execute judgment upon all men, and many will be those slain by the Lord."* So what is the sign that God sets among his people? It is the evidence that God is present in judgment. That is how the glory of God will be revealed, in the destruction of sinful, God-defying people.

In the TV show "Survivor" typically 16 people try to outwit, outplay and outlast each other. Whether a person survives or not also depends on decisions made by the Tribal Council. God chooses survivors as his news broadcasters. These are people who have survived the terrible judgment which destroyed Jerusalem. These survivors are filled with a sense of urgency, wanting all people around the world need to learn from what has happened in Jerusalem. Everyone needs to understand that God is to be feared by all people. As verse 18 indicates God will judge all people who are characterised by evil, God-defying actions and imaginations. But the news broadcasters God sends out also tell people of something happening in the New Jerusalem, something which arouses an intense thirst in the hearts of people, which causes them to salivate at the very hearing of the news. People will long to come to the New Jerusalem and see it for themselves.

We are the ones whom God spares in his judgment of the world. We now live in the great Gospel Age. We are the messengers God sends to the nations.

2. Judgment: International Shame

In the verse that closes his entire book, Isaiah bids us look through his camera at a gruesome sight. He shows us a disaster of unprecedented proportions. What are some recent disasters that have shocked you? If you could take all the disasters which have ever happened in human history and roll them into one, then you might have some faint inkling of the dimensions of the horror Isaiah presents to us. Listen to the words with which Isaiah closes his book: all mankind *"will go out and look upon the dead bodies of those who rebelled against me; their worm will not die, nor will their fire be quenched, and they will be loathsome to all mankind."*

Is Isaiah the Stephen King of Old Testament writers? Why does he close his great work in such a seemingly ghoulish way? Clearly Isaiah is not writing in a romantic and idealistic way. He does not close off his great book by saying, "And they all lived happily ever after." Isaiah is not interested in fairy tales. What is his purpose in writing as he does?

There are no garbage bins or garbage trucks in most of Pakistan. At one time we were living in a hostel. Nearby an open pit had been dug. All missionaries took their rubbish and dumped it in this pit. Every now and then someone would set a match to it. It was a loathsome place - a place where maggots bred and where a fire was often smouldering. That is the image Isaiah sets before us: an unsavoury picture of a giant rubbish dump outside the city of the New Jerusalem. The truly frightening thing is that it is not empty milk cartons, egg shells, vegetable peelings, unwanted newspapers, leftover meals, and such like which lies in the pit smouldering and rotting away - it is people.

Paul engages in a pun in Romans 1:28: *"since [people] did not think it worthwhile to retain the knowledge of God, [God] gave them up to a worthless mind."* If we treat God as having little or no value in our lives then the result is that our minds become worthless. We become truly worthless people in and of ourselves because it is the way a person thinks that determines the true worth of a person. Isaiah looks down the telescope at the very end of history. He sees what will become of those who treated God as though he was like a piece of garbage. They will be treated as garbage themselves, thrown on the rubbish heap outside the marvellous heavenly city - Hell. Justice will be done.

What do you really think of God? Do you really treat him as being your King? Does he really have much say in your life or do you do pretty well as you please? When you make important decisions do you seriously consult God about them and earnestly try to understand what he wants you to do? I dare say that when you were courting the person you loved thoughts of that person filled your mind. You were constantly thinking of the

person you loved because that person was immensely precious to you. If you have set your heart on a particular job then you find your thoughts constantly gravitating back to that job. Wherever your treasure is there your heart will be also. That which you treasure acts like the force of gravity constantly pulling your thoughts towards it. You know then whether you really value knowing God and obeying him as you should.

3. Pilgrimage: International Travel

Some years back I was talking on the phone with a friend. He asked whether I would be taking some days off for a holiday. I said, "No", my big holiday comes next January. I then told him about our holiday place north of Taree. It was in beautiful scenic surroundings at the foot of Middle Brother Mountain, leading into thousands of acres of State Forest. It had nice units, a swimming pool, horse rides, a variety of recreational options and delicious home-cooked meals. We enjoyed it so much the first time that we decided to go back again. When I told my friend about all this, he said, "Sounds like a great place, give me some brochures." Those friends ended up coming with us each year to this place.

Isaiah sees a time coming when people who truly love the Lord will tell of the grandeur and wonder of the new Jerusalem. They will describe the splendour and majesty of the King who lives in the new Jerusalem, who has created within it the most wonderful of societies. The pull of the glory of God will be too hard to resist. He describes all of this in 66:18-20. God says, *"...I am about to come and gather all nations and tongues, and they will come and see my glory. I will set a sign among them, and I will send some of those who survive to the nations - to Tarshish, to the Libyans and Lydians (famous as archers), to Tubal and Greece, and to the distant islands that have not heard of my fame or seen my glory. They will proclaim by glory among the nations. And they will bring all your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord..."* At the time anticipated by Isaiah people from every nation will think, "We must see the glory of God." People from every land and cultural background will hunger and thirst and ache with longing to go to the new Jerusalem to see God in his splendour and greatness, to come into his presence and tell him how unspeakably great he really is.

I wrote a 30,000 word thesis years ago. I started off using only an old typewriter. I literally had to use scissors and paste to reword things and change the order in which I made my points - a laborious process. Then I bought my first computer, an Apple IIC and a Brother Dot Matrix Printer. It made the task of writing that thesis so much easier that I wondered why I had been so foolish as to persevere with scissors and paste for so long.

Before I came to know Christ I was like a person who tried to be satisfied with a scissors and paste approach to life, not realising that there was a Pentium Computer level at which my life could be operating. Without Christ we can make some changes in our lives which might improve the quality of our lives somewhat. But the fullness of life which can be experienced in the New Jerusalem is only attained by those who are prepared to live under the Lordship and Control of King Jesus.

This is what is meant in verse 23 when God says, *"all mankind will come and bow down before me."* This is what is meant when in verse 18 God says that all nations and tongues *"will come and see my glory."* That is, all people will come to experience the glory and splendour of the God who lives in the New Jerusalem. When newcomers come to this church, especially those from other cultural backgrounds, do they see just pew-sitters and moralists, or do they sense from the way you relate to each other and to them that Jesus is truly alive and dynamically in control of your lives? If you were on trial for being true Christians would there be enough evidence to convict you?

These messengers of whom Isaiah speaks are not simply super-effective travel agents. They do not attract people to the new Jerusalem by offering dirt cheap air fares and accommodation and special deals. They do not attract people to the new Jerusalem by glossy advertising, by projecting captivating and romantic images on prime-time television. No, as verse 19 informs us, these messengers will simply declare God's glory. It is not the sights of Jerusalem and its surrounds that they will tell of. They will not appeal to people's historical interest by explaining the rich history of Jerusalem and by encouraging people to come and see an intriguing historical site. They will not even entice people to come in order that they might see for themselves the places where Jesus walked and taught, and healed and slept, and bled and died. They will not encourage people to come to Jerusalem in order to walk in the footsteps of Jesus. They will not appeal to the beauty, grandeur and rich historical antiquity of Jerusalem. None of these things, great as they may be, will cause all peoples of the world to drop everything, to make pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem their supreme priority. What will make people believe that the most important thing they can do with their lives is to come to the New Jerusalem? It is simply this: they will know that God in his glory dwells in the New Jerusalem.

4. Worship: International Acclaim

One time I caught a cab. The Lebanese cab driver had had a miserable day. He started from Parramatta. Two Anglo-Celtic Australian men, who were not together, both wanted to go to Blacktown. They'd agreed to share the cab and pay half the fare each. One man got out and gave his cost of the fare to the other man. The cab driver drove on. The remaining man asked to stop at a service station so he could change his money to pay the fare. He then disappeared and the cab driver lost two sizable fares. The cab driver said he could have coped with the man just running off and not paying his part of the fare, but what really upset him was the fact that this man had also stolen the other man's fare. I sympathised with him and told him I wouldn't want to be in the thief's shoes on the judgment day. He replied, "Most people in Australia never think about the judgment day."

That Lebanese taxi driver is right. Most Australians do not fear God. In 66:23 God says, "'From one New Moon to another and from one Sabbath to another, all mankind will come and bow down before me,' says the Lord." Isaiah looks ahead to a time when all people will not only respect God. "*From one New Moon to another*", that is, monthly, and "*from one Sabbath to another*", that is, weekly, all people will be engaged in worshipping God. People from every tribe and tongue, and people and nation will come on a pilgrimage to the New Jerusalem with one-way tickets, and they will gladly kneel before the King of kings, acknowledging his greatness and his complete right to control their lives.

It's time for us to bring to the New Jerusalem all of those in every nation who are ready to honour God. In verse 20 Isaiah says that those who declare God's glory to the nations, those who preach the gospel to all nations, "*will bring your brothers, from all the nations, to my holy mountain in Jerusalem as an offering to the Lord.*" The movie *Schindler's List* is about Oskar Schindler who saved hundreds of Jews from the gas chambers. After the war these survivors settled in different nations. The movie ends with all of these survivors assembled at the tomb of Oskar Schindler in Jerusalem to honour him for saving their lives. It was they and not Oskar Schindler who benefited from this. But when God gathers together an international people what matters is not what this means for these new citizens of the New Jerusalem but what it means for God himself. We declare the gospel to people and bring them under the Lordship of Christ so that we and they might honour God for all he has done. Winning people for Christ is not a matter of collecting scalps, demonstrating how skilful we are in waging the spiritual battle. We are not scratching another notch on our gun. We bring people to the Lord as an offering to him, knowing that in the New Jerusalem the Lord will be pleased with this offering, because as 65:19 tells us, in the New Jerusalem the Lord will take delight in his people.

Do you and I go to much trouble in seeking to bring people from all nations into the New Jerusalem? Isaiah tells us that the messengers who declare the glory of God to the peoples of this world are so keen to bring people under God's rule in the New Jerusalem that they arrange to get them there by all means available - *"on horses, in chariots, and wagons, and on mules and camels."* If Isaiah was alive today I'm sure he would update this and add such things 'planes, ships, trains, trams, buses and even submarines.' It is one thing to tell people about the greatness of Christ's rule. It is another thing for people to want to enter the kingdom of God. But we must also find ways of facilitating the pilgrimage of people into the kingdom of God. Paul said in Colossians 1:28-29: *"We proclaim him, admonishing and teaching everyone with all wisdom, so that we may present everyone perfect in Christ. To this end I labour, struggling with all his energy, which so powerfully works in me."* It is not enough just to present the gospel to people. Like Paul we must keep on labouring with all the energy God gives us to make sure that people are actually brought into the very presence of Christ in the Kingdom of God, in the New Jerusalem.

The offering of these people from the nations is compared to the offerings Israelites made using clean vessels. Remember here that the Jews regarded non-Jewish persons as unclean. They had no interest in relating to them and seeking to bring them into God's kingdom. One time I caught a cab driven by a friendly Italian. When I told him I came from New Zealand he said that black New Zealanders - he meant, Maoris - come to Sydney and make trouble. From the ensuing conversation it was clear that he regarded virtually all blacks as bad people. The world is filled with examples of this and sadly, we Christians who ought to know better and ought to be setting an example for the world, also tend to keep our distance from peoples who are different from ourselves, especially Muslims. When we rationalise these attitudes then we are acting in much the same manner as the Jews who separated themselves from non-Jewish people because they regarded them as unclean. But Isaiah indicates that if we want to properly worship God then the best thing we can do is to bring him people from every nation who have been made clean. Remember what Peter the Jew said when he entered the home of the Gentile Cornelius: *"You are well aware that it is against our law for a Jew to associate with a Gentile or visit him. But God has shown me that I should not call any man impure or unclean"* (Acts 10:28).

At the time of historical climax foreseen by Isaiah God will select some of the Gentiles to be priests and Levites. Obviously since Isaiah can speak of Gentiles being Levites he does not mean by "Levites" those who are physically descended from Levi. He is saying that God will choose non-Jewish people to fulfil the same function previously performed by only Jews. Isaiah is saying that in the New Jerusalem all people will be treated exactly alike. They will all equally be children of God irrespective of their ethnic background.