

France House Re-Union. Eskdale War Memorial Church . February 2004.

Sermon.

Beginning: When Jesus began his life as an itinerant preacher; he often quoted from the Book of Isaiah.

On the day he arrived back at the temple in his home town of Nazareth, he asked for the scroll of Isaiah, opened it and read **"The spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach the good news to the poor, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim release from darkness for the prisoners, and recovery of sight for the blind, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and to comfort those who mourn."** Then he rolled up the scroll and sat down.

I enjoy exploring the book of Isaiah because this old prophet writes with such power and beautiful imagery.

In Chapter 8 he describes the Israelites as people who have rejected the gently flowing waters of Shiloah, by which he means their way of peace, and are about to be engulfed by the Euphrates river, in flood, which is his metaphor for war with Assyria. In impassioned verse he begs the people to turn back to God.

"God is with us!" Isaiah proclaims. **"He will not let us be destroyed!"**

I am sure that you who lived beside the gentle Esk river, and then experienced the disastrous flood of 1938, can picture the imagery of Isaiah's writing, as he describes the transformation of a nation, from peace to war. Verse 11 begins

"The Lord spoke to me with his strong hand upon me, warning me not to follow the way of this people. He said "The Lord Almighty is the One you are to regard as holy, he is the one you are to fear, he is the one you are to dread,.....and he will be a sanctuary!"

I suppose, as little boys leaving your first home in Napier, and heading out to Eskdale, you would have wondered what was in store for you. Was France house a place to fear? a place to dread? It was, I believe a place where the law was strictly upheld, and yet, it did become, for most of you, a place of sanctuary.

The book of Isaiah continues - **"Here am I, and the children you have given me. We are signs and symbols in Israel, from the Lord Almighty, who dwells on Mt Zion! When men tell you to consult mediums and spiritists, who whisper and mutter, should not a people inquire of their God? Why consult the dead on behalf of the living? Look to the law and to the testimony! If the mediums and spiritists do not speak according to God's Word, they have no light of dawn."**

I can almost imagine Les Shaw standing on the lawn in front of France House and saying *"Here am I, and the children you have given me! We will be signs and symbols in Eskdale, from the Lord Almighty.... and Mother Shaw and I will bring into these young minds "the light of dawn."*

To my mind that beautiful and profound little phrase is Isaiah at his best: ***"They have no light of dawn!"***

He is saying, I think, that without the good old 10 commandments; without God's holy word, the world would be in a sorry state. This is how he goes on to describe those who seek guidance from the wrong direction..... **"Distressed and hungry, they will roam through the land..... when they are famished, they will become enraged, and looking upward they will curse their king and their God. Then they will look towards the earth and see only distress and darkness, and fearful gloom,.... and they will be thrust into utter darkness ..."**

He paints such a moving picture of the hopelessness and aimlessness of people adrift in a spiritual desert...

They have no light of dawn no hope, no future, nothing to aspire towards, no experience of loving and being loved., no comfort in the approaching day. How many are living in our world to-day in a similar plight? Spiritually, and sometimes physically starved, people turn to all sorts of ways of deadening their pain. Booze, drugs, cheap thrills, brain deadening music, poor quality entertainment...erratic violence, they too become enraged... they too see only distress and darkness and fearful gloom.

The next chapter, chapter nine, re-introduces hope to the people of Israel. - **" God is with us!" ... " God will not forsake His chosen people....."** and then we come to those well known pre-Christmas verses **"The people who walked in darkness, have seen a great light; on those living in the land of the shadow of death, a light has dawned! "** **"for unto us a child is born to us a Son is given; the government will be on his shoulders and he will be called Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace!"**

To-morrow, the 2nd of February is the Anniversary of the Presentation of Jesus in the temple at Jerusalem.

Mary's 40 days of isolation after the birth of her child had passed, and she and Joseph were able to go to the temple, where Joseph would purchase two doves to be sacrificed for Mary's purification ritual; and pay about five shekels to have his firstborn son "redeemed" according to Jewish Law. and entered into the records as a descendent of King David's line back through Abraham to Adam and therefore a child of God.

So, to-day we read that gospel document, from Luke, about the two spiritual old people in the temple, who had been waiting and praying for years, to see a Saving Light dawn on a new era, in God's ongoing work of creation. Both Simeon and Anna recognised the baby Jesus as the new, contemporary source of God's Light in the world, a spiritual beacon for all mankind.. "a light to lighten the *Gentiles and the glory of God's people Israel." In affirming Jesus they were also affirming the potential for salvation inherent in every new human life.

Well now, what has all this ancient stuff got to do with a thanksgiving for the experience of being raised in a home for homeless boys? Can you still remember what it was like? Perhaps it would be more to the point for us to study some Drummond Family poetry (courtesy of Jim Henderson) such as this -

For forty long years I've been euchred, with all sorts of horrible pains, I've had every ailment, I reckon, from rupture to varicose veins! Neuritis with me is a hobby, and I'm told I've a valvular heart, while the gas storing up in my stomach would blow any carthorse apart. So my time is all spent in the toilet, or moaning and groaning in bed, and my pals simply murmur in passing.. its time the old gaffer was dead!! ('From Top to Bottom Reinga to Bluff by Jim Henderson. ISBN 0-473-04930-9)

Well, be that as it may.....

If I had been a France House Boy, as I grew older, and saw some of the aftermath of being unhappily adopted, or brought up in a series of foster homes, I think I would give thanks for the permanence of France House as my home for several years; for being fed, and having clothes to wear, attending the same school, sleeping under the same roof, having the same system of chores to do, the same discipline to adhere to; having the freedom to enjoy the outdoors; play sport; learn to box and wrestle; learn to get along with others, learn to be fair.

Most of all I would give thanks for the opportunity to grow up with other boys who were in the same boat; for the brotherly companionship of older and younger boys, and the understanding, and opportunities for close friendships, inherent in that situation.

I believe that many children in the well meaning care of Winz to-day, grow up in painful isolation; never feel truly part of a family; are moved from pillar to post like little parcels of human flesh and blood that never blend with their surroundings. Then, as Isaiah put it "when they grow up spiritually famished they become enraged... they see only distress and darkness... they have no light of dawn.

So, old boys of France House, I think you may well give thanks that you were also shown " the spiritual light of dawn"; taught the concept of hope; the promise of eternal forgiveness and love; the example and teaching of Christ. Here, in this little church, where you possibly came reluctantly to hear many a dry, uninteresting sermon; and where you were wise to recall the reading set down, in case the Boss asked you later what it was!

Never-the-less, bored or otherwise, you were exposed to the word of God, and you understood what the Good Lord expected from those who were inspired to lead a Christian life. Seeds were sown in your young minds which I have no doubt bore rewarding fruit, for yourselves and those you chose to love, and for the children God gave into your keeping.

How many boys to-day can have as much pride in their home, and confidence in their up-bringing, as you did?

I suppose, had you known me in those days, and some of you did, I may have seemed to you to be a privileged child; a nice home to live in, my real mother and father and brothers to live with; a separate bedroom with a fluffy goatskin mat on the floor., my own candle-stick on my kerosene box dressing table.

But I lived in the same era as you; I too had to chop kindling, gather sticks for the copper fire on wash days, eat porridge and bread and milk, wash dishes, wear hand-me-down clothes, clean out the chook house, empty the chamber pots, go barefoot because my one pair of shoes had got too tight, teach slobbery calves to drink, endure teasing at home and at school; I too went to bed in tears sometimes; carried things that were too heavy for me; accepted soggy plum jam sandwiches in a flax kit, for my school lunch. **All those things were just growing pains. It is the basic values we absorb, un-knowingly, that set the patterns of our future lives.**

I'm sure both you, and I, can thank God to-day, for parents like my Mr and Mrs Sutton, and care-givers like your Mr and Mrs Shaw, who had the idealism, and the loving wisdom, to place good values in front of us every day; who strived to instill into our hearts and minds the hope of good to-morrows; and who shared with us their faith, that all may meet, together with God, in the eternal light of dawn. Amen.