

The God who restores (Isaiah 40:1-11)

Knowing God (Simon Rea)

Sunday Morning 9:00am 1 June 2008

You must have seen them already: How about Superhomes, or Grand designs; a Place in the sun; and then Housetrapped in the Sun or the granddaddy of them all Location Location followed by Relocation, Relocation. Daytime TV is full of new home improvement programmes. In fact there's even a whole channel which appears to be devoted to that sort of programming for about 90% of it's output. (It's called Discovery Real Time by the way in case you want to search it out - or avoid it like the plague)! Despite the credit crunch, people still seem fascinated by the idea of moving away and building new, bigger and better homes in the search for the perfect lifestyle. While I don't spend my afternoons gazing in awe, wonder and envy at the exploits of those property developers, I'm not immune to all that either. As you know, at the end of July, my family and I will be leaving Moreton and moving to London where I will take up a new post as pioneer minister at the church of St Peter's on the Stonegrove

estate in north west London.

Unfortunately, the area isn't as nice as Wirral, our new house appears to be smaller and to cap it all they're going to be knocking the whole estate down (including the church and my house) within the next five years or so. That is unless the church falls down first. Perhaps I should have watched some of those programmes before leaving!

So why am I going to leave the relative comfort and safety of Moreton and move into a situation like that? The answer has got a lot to do with the topics we'll be looking at over the next few weeks and perhaps especially with the first one. This morning we're starting a series of sermons on what it means to know God. That's because most people don't have a clear idea of what God is really like. For some he's a like gentle grandfather who loves indulging his children. For others he's like a parent who abuses his kids or who just sits and watches as the abuse happens. For others, he either doesn't exist or if he does exist, he's just another lifestyle choice which may or may not be relevant to them at this particular time!

That's why we'll be spending the next few weeks looking at what the Bible tells us about who God is and what he's really like and to help us with that, we'll be using the book of Isaiah. We'll see how God isn't an overindulgent grandparent, an abusive or useless parent. We'll learn again how relevant he is for our lives today and not just for our lives but also for the lives of everyone else, too because he is the God who creates, acts, peaks, saves, sustains and restores. You'll find the order of the talks listed in your cream coloured leaflets. Please do use the leaflets to help you prepare for the coming services by reading the relevant passages in advance.

But what has all that got to do with me moving down to London to an estate which is about to be demolished, a house with an uncertain future and a church which has severe structural defects?

It's not because I have a lot of faith in the developers. They are Barret Homes, Barnet Council and Family Mosaic Housing Association, by the way. Why not? Well, they all have their own agendas and most of them appear to be in it for the money, anyway. But it is because I have a lot

more faith in the God who restores. Why? Because I've seen him work in my life and in the lives of others in the past but more than that, it's because of what the Bible tells us about his character, about who he is and how he works. And by the end of today's talk, I hope we'll all be encouraged to trust in him more because he is so much more trustworthy than any earthly property developer - even though, like some of them, he is into the business of restoration. But for something to be restored, someone must first realise that it's actually been broken.

There's an old saying which goes like this "If it ain't broke, don't fix it." We mostly hear it now when pundits are complaining about someone being left out of the England football side again (generally David Beckham), even though the team hasn't qualified for this years European Championships! If it ain't broke, then broke don't fix it. Surely the opposite must be true, too: If it is broke, then fix it. That applies to machines, to football teams, and as our reading shows us even to peoples. And as Christians we know it also applies to

people like us.

Our first reading comes right at the start of what has been called the "New Testament section" of the Isaiah. Like our Protestant Bibles, the whole of Isaiah has 66 books and this part of Isaiah has twenty-seven chapters in it, similar to the twenty-seven books of the NT. Our reading begins with the words used at the start of Mark's and Matthew's gospels to herald the ministry of John the Baptist (40:3-4 with Matt. 3:1-3) who himself was a herald for the coming Christ. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are emphasizes God's judgment on His people. Again and again we learn how and why Israel became a broken people. But Isa. 40-66 is of comfort and redemption. It was written to encourage the Jewish remnant that would be delivered from the Babylonian captivity after their seventy years of captivity. Isaiah wrote this amazing prophecy over 150 years before the remnant would ever need it for their encouragement. Why were they in captivity? Because they had failed to follow God or listen to his prophets. Again and again, they had chosen the way of the world, the way that leads to

discord, destruction and death instead of the way that leads to life.

Israel was broken, Israel needed to be restored? How was God going to do that? This week's reading shows us that he was going to do it in in both expected and unexpected ways. God still works in the same way, both expectedly and unexpectedly. At times when we might feel left behind or disappointed by God, it's vital for us to keep that in mind, so that we don't easily lose heart.

The reading tells us that God works in expected ways. Imagine how the Jews must have felt: defeated in battle by gentiles, conquered by foreign powers, forcibly evicted from the land God had promised to them and carted off to the other side of the world. How do you think they would want God to act? Read v 4, 8 and 10 to get an idea. These verses tell us something very important about God, something that many would have us forget because it just doesn't fit in with their ideas of how they think God should be: This is not the picture of a gentle grandpa God! They tell of God's great power v10 "See, the Sovereign LORD comes

with power, and his arm rules for him." God's breath withering the grass and the flowers. That doesn't sound threatening until you realise that people are being compared to the grass and the flowers here. V4 makes God sound like a juggernaut, a gigantic bulldozer demolishing everything in his way. People, even great and important people, kings and queens, politicians, and generals come whose words may change the destiny of nations, even they come and go like the flowers in our gardens: 8 The grass withers and the flowers fall, but the word of our God stands forever." If we are tempted to despair at all the events we see in the world around us, then this should put those events in the right perspective!

As one of my favourite song goes: "Our God is a great big God"! But God is not only great: He's also glorious. V5 [And] the glory of the LORD will be revealed, and all mankind together will see it. God is no respecter of people, no matter how important they may think they are, and he is no respecter of peoples, either. All of humanity will see God's glory and the glory of his son and the only possible

reaction to his glory will be to bow down in front of him: What is God's glory like? Read Philippians 2 to find out! Paul writes: Therefore God exalted him to the highest place and gave him the name that is above every name, that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father. (Php 2:9-11) But I need to slow down because I'm a bit ahead of myself. That's one of the unexpected aspects of God's character that the Bible tells us about.

The Jews of Isaiah's day, the Jews of Jesus' day and most Jews since then would have been expecting God to show his glory and his power politically and militarily but our reading reminds us that there is so much more to God than military might and political power.

So what will he be like, this God who restores? We can expect him to be powerful and glorious but what is the unexpected aspect of his character for us in this reading? Let's go to v11 to find out:

[He] God tends his flock like a shepherd: He gathers the lambs in his arms and carries them close to his heart; he gently leads those that have young.

For us that picture is a million miles away from the power and glory I've just been talking about. Shepherds generally don't come very high in the terrifying rulers stakes, do they? But this is how Isaiah describes him: faithful, loving and caring. Faithful because shepherds shouldn't leave their sheep. Loving because of the way they should protect the vulnerable and caring because of the way they lead those who need especial care. That's how God is. Sadly shepherds aren't always like that and the Bible sometimes uses the picture of a shepherd to remind us of how rulers neglect their people, not how they care for them. But this passage highlights the way of the good shepherd, the way as we know, Jesus really was.

God works in both expected and unexpected ways because God's character is as we would expect from the one who created the universe and unexpected because he is also the one who sent his

only Son, that all who believe in him should not perish but have eternal life. That's why people need to follow him and trust him. And that includes all of us here this morning whether we have consciously made a decision to follow him already or not. The Bible tells us that all have sinned and fallen short of God's glorious plans for our lives but God is both loving and caring enough to want us to turn to him and powerful enough to restore us when we fail again and again as we try to live the lives we know we should.

In their exile in Babylon, the Jews realised how broken they were as people and as a people. They knew they needed to be restored. We may not have been evicted from our homes and carted off to the east but as individuals and as a nation we still need God's restoration. We are still like grass and flowers: beautiful but weak. We are broke and we do need fixing - no matter what the world wants us to believe. Restoration doesn't have to be about relocation. It can happen wherever we happen to be. But it does mean keeping our eyes on the one who works expectedly and unexpectedly in our

lives. Holy Communion is a wonderful way of doing that and reminding ourselves of what it cost God for us to know his expected and unexpected character. As we prepare to take communion now, PRAY