

SERMON

Isaiah 62:8-12

The Spirit is at Work in History

Nunawading and Waverley, 23-1-22

It can be an anxious experience to watch history unfold. 100,000 Russian troops and armaments are amassed on the border of Ukraine. Jets and warships have been harassing Taiwan and escalating tensions there. Closer to home, as we enter the third year of the Pandemic, the Omicron variant is creating chaos here and elsewhere. How is God active in history? What assurance do we have that he really is in control of things?

Perhaps we need to begin by asking what history is. According to the dictionary, it is 'the study of past events, particularly in human affairs.' For most people, there is human history; for us, there is history and God's story within it. We can be tempted to think that events are random, or worse, that human beings are the centre of history. Our heavenly Father provides us with great comfort by not putting this burden on our shoulders. History is not solely dependent on us and nor are we pawns of chance events. Fifty percent of young people report that their anxiety over global warming impacts their lives. Jesus is Lord over climate change; he is using it, using our mistakes, and coordinating all events to serve his plans, plans that are founded in love. Now, isn't that a great message of hope!

The witness of the Holy Bible tells us that history is controlled by God's story, his plan of salvation. We have an example here in Isaiah 62 of how the Lord makes a declaration and history responds by moving in that direction:

**Pay attention! Yahweh has proclaimed to the ends of the earth:
Say to the daughter of Zion: "Your deliverance is coming;
his reward is with him and his recompense is before him."**

When the exiles from Babylonia, **the daughter of Zion**, returned to Jerusalem and other major towns, they were confronted by rubble. Underneath the burnt timbers, the smashed walls and large blocks of stone were the temple and other major buildings. Foreigners had moved in and taken possession of their properties and farms. Tensions were running pretty hot and in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah we hear of plots, attacks and slanderous letters written to undermine the efforts of returned Jews to rebuild their country. It was a mess yet by faith, God's hand in history could be seen. Cyrus, the Persian ruler, took control of the Babylonian empire, virtually without a fight in 539BC. That same year, he released the Jewish captives and others and issued an edict that they could return to their homeland. Just like that! Moreover, he provided them with funds to build the temple, fundings its construction. This ruler was a miracle from God.

The deflated Jewish believers could take great encouragement from the Spirit at work in history.

The plan of God, by a free act of grace, is to **bring redemption to the ends of the earth** and to create a new people moved by his Spirit to know him and to be changed by him. It is truly history, his-story. The evidence for this is Jesus Christ, his Son. God promised to come, to be **Emmanuel**, born of a virgin or a young woman, to be **a suffering servant**, to bring life and redemption through his vicarious suffering, and then be exalted, to rise from death and bring the universe under his power. All these prophecies came to happen in history

We are this new Israel or true Israel. Therefore, our Father speaks to us:

Pass through, pass through the gates;

clear the way for the people.

Build-up, build-up the highway; remove the stones.

Raise up a standard over the peoples.

The Father has called us to be like those exiled people who passed through the Babylonian **gates**, to be prepared to embark on a journey to build the heavenly Jerusalem. The road ahead is not clear and God's work in history is often mysterious. However, we believe that an invisible **highway** is being built under the feet of his people as they trust the Lord and move out to the ends of the earth with the saving message of Jesus Christ. The Holy Spirit leads us so that as we show our preparedness to try new things, to experiment, to be prepared to fail as a church, to go beyond what we are comfortable doing, from time to time, we shall be able to discern the power of God at work in our little part of the world. No one knows if an English Conversation Club will work, or if a Chinese fellowship can be created or if Events Evangelism will succeed in bringing people to Christ. However, we do these things because we believe that if we act, the Holy Spirit has already planned it, has already acted before we do. So, If we think the Spirit is opening **a gate, then we have to pass through it.** We trust him because this is the way the Lord is at work in history.