

We're going to read some verses, just four verses from Isaiah chapter 65, that we're going to reflect on a little bit later, in a moment in the service. Let's read these words – I'll read them and you can follow them (as they come up on the screen). This is the prophecy that Isaiah received in these verses:

[Reading Isaiah 65:20-23]

Amen.

We're going to reflect on those verses for a few moments.

There was a book written a few years ago and the author took these verses and described them as “the Isaiah Vision” - the Isaiah Vision of God's Plan for Society. And just for a few moments we're going to reflect on what the picture is there. And I want to start using that wonderful word that we have from Hebrew, the word: “Shalom”, often translated as “Peace”; but actually Shalom has a much bigger meaning than simply Peace – it really refers to Wholeness, it refers to a sense of complete oneness that comes through God, it refers to that sense of connectedness and wellness that God seeks to bring to all things. These verses fill out that sense of the word Shalom.

There's an emotional aspect to what is described in those four verses that we looked at from Isaiah a moment ago. There's an emotional aspect to them: there'll be no more sorrow. And I know that in particular at the moment, sorrow and anxiety are something that are heightened for us and for our nation and the world. But the fact that God's plan and intention is that his Shalom should take us to a place where there is no more sorrow.

And this picture of emotional Shalom, emotional wholeness speaks of a situation in which the city and the people are blessed and valued – all of the people blessed and valued. And the city as a whole blessed and valued by God. So there won't be some who are first class citizens and others who are second class treated poorly, pushed off and ignored, their needs ignored. As sense that God's Shalom will bring wholeness and contentment to all people.

There's a social aspect to what's described in these verses as well. Children will thrive, and isn't that such a prescient thing to be noting at the moment as we recognise that many children have missed up to six months of education in school, and now teachers and other support staff having to work so hard to try and regain that place where the children were, and trying to make up for those lost months of education. But children thriving in our society.

And also the sense of long life well lived, in those great verses where it says that a person who lives only to one hundred years old will be considered as going before their time. That sense that long life was to be something that would become something that was not unusual. God's intention was that life should be long and full of good things; even to the end that life would be worth living and full of joy, and beauty, and wholeness.

This is also an economic aspect to what is being described in these verses. The sense in these verses that all will reap the just rewards of their labours: if you plant a vineyard, you will then get to taste the produce, the wine that is produced from your vineyard – that's a metaphor. (In our previous garden we did have a vine, but I wanted to cut it down because a vine gets everywhere and this thing was really thick and it had wrapped itself around next door's tree, but the people at

the bottom of the garden said "Please don't cut it down as one of the branches has come over our side and now we've trained it round the wall and up onto the back of the house. So please don't cut it down because although you can't eat the grapes" (they were quite bitter) "it looks wonderful on the side of our house." So grudgingly I said "I'll leave it then.") But that sense, that metaphor for the work that we do, the toil that we put in life, we will also experience the benefits of that work and that toil that we've put in. That sense of working hard, but enjoying the benefits of that work.

And also that all will have a share in the bounty of the land. There were particular rules within the Jewish faith. You may remember the story of Ruth and Naomi when they went back to Naomi's home, Naomi sent Ruth out into the fields to glean (and glean is one of those old words which means "to take up the excess grain that's been left intentionally by the harvesters"). The Jewish Law said, "When you are harvesting don't take everything, leave some for the poor so that they can come and glean (in other words find) the grain that has been left behind, so that they don't starve." And that sense that the bounty of the land is great enough for all to be able to enjoy it.

And finally, there's a spiritual aspect that runs through all of these different aspects, and runs through the sense of what Shalom means. This whole picture is one of God and humanity in an intimate and a responsive relationship; in other words this relationship was to be dynamic, there was to be a sense that God was supporting and strengthening individuals and the whole community, and the whole community was then involved in this Shalom project - we're all contributing to it and we're all benefiting from it. And that's the intention of God outlined in these verses.

In a little while we're going to look at our community around us in Croydon in this area. And the reality is that this is not the picture that we see, not the full picture - there may be aspects of some of this that we look at and say, "Yeah, I see glimpses of that sometimes." But God's intention is that this vision should be more and more fulfilled in our world and in our community.

And as we break into small groups a little bit later in the service we're going to think about what are the issues that are stopping this Shalom being real for us in our community, in our network of connections; what's stopping this being more of a reality. How can we respond to be move a little bit closer to God's Shalom for our community?