

Let's start with an invitation! What do we have in the first few verses of this passage? A string of invitations. Come! Come! Come!

- Come, all you who are thirsty.
- Come to the waters.
- Come, buy and eat!
- Come, buy wine and milk without money and without cost.
- Give ear and come to me.

God is inviting everybody who is hungering and thirsting – and by that I understand that the invitation is for everybody, for those who prosper and for those who do not. And there is a progression in the order that he is mentioning things that we should come to drink. First of all water, essential for life. After that, milk, essential for growth. And after that, wine, essential for celebration. I see that God is showing us an invitation and a promise for things that are more than just the essentials of life. As Jesus said in John chapter 10, “I have come that they might have life, and that they might have it more abundantly”.

And like every good thing that God gives us, it is a free gift: without money and without cost. That is just as well, because there is nothing we can give to God that has any value: later, Isaiah will say that all our righteousnesses are as filthy rags. If I have nothing to pay with, then I will be very grateful for a gift, especially one that will give me life abundantly!

What happens after we come to God? God wants to make a covenant with us, just like he made with David. At least, that was what I started off writing: that he was making a covenant with us *like* the one he made with David. But that isn't it... God isn't making a covenant with us *like* the one he made with David: rather, it is the realisation of that covenant with us.

God has made David

- a witness to the peoples,
- a leader and
- commander of the peoples.

On the other hand,

- you will summon nations you know not,
- and nations that do not know you will hasten to you, because of the LORD your God, the Holy One of Israel, for he has endowed you with splendour.

David was a witness, a leader and a commander of God's people, but now the people are. The key words now are "give ear" or "listen" and "see".

But time is running out for all these things. Verse 6 says "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call on him while he is near" which is surely a warning to us all that we do need to seek the Lord. The verse might be warning us that the last days are upon us: indeed they are. Didn't the last days begin when Adam and Eve left Eden? But for each of us we need to recognise that however long it will be till Christ returns in glory, time is short for each of us. Verse 7 tells us what will happen to each one of us who turns away from his or her former life, repents and chooses to follow God's way through Christ.

"Let the wicked forsake his way and the evil man his thoughts. Let him turn to the LORD, and he will have mercy on him, and to our God, for he will freely pardon." This is not telling us that everyone will be pardoned. This is not telling us that everyone will have eternal life. But it is telling us that **if** we turn to the Lord, **then** he **will** have mercy and **will** freely pardon. But it's conditional on that first, very simple, step.

God knows how these things will be done. He declares: "For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts."

Thinking about this passage takes me back to the time just after I had taken the step I described a moment ago and turned away from my former life and chosen the gift of life in God through Jesus Christ. My understanding of God's ways was very limited. I remember those who were leading and mentoring me listening to some of the thoughts and ideas I had from elsewhere and saying "But God says..." and showing me how God's teaching was different from what I previously understood.

It was very hard to turn away from so many ideas I brought from my previous secular upbringing and heritage, but I am now quite sure that God's way is the right way.

That's the promise from God's word. We're in the wintertime now, when we are aware of the weather, often not in a good way. We complain about the rain and I'm sure that as winter carries on we will be complaining about the snow too. But in fact, what of them?

"As the rain and the snow come down from heaven, and do not return to it without watering the earth and making it bud and flourish, so that it yields seed for the sower and bread for the eater, so is my word that goes out from my mouth: It will not return to me empty, but will accomplish what I desire and achieve the purpose for which I sent it."

God's word is the key: just as the rain and snow enable the crops to grow, God's word enables our spiritual growth. I know that I don't spend as long reading and studying God's word as I should, and it shows as I know that my spiritual growth is not as it should be. Without sufficient snow and water, there's not enough to make the seed for the sower and bread for the eater.

Isaiah was thinking of the needs of the people in the exile in Babylon, but we can't hear about seed and sower without thinking of the parable of the sower, where the seed represents the Word. Sometimes the seed grows

and bears much fruit, sometimes it is choked by the cares of the world.

Yet there is hope for you and me for each one of us too. The celebration is upon us, and the New Year is a time that we can make a new start in whatever it is we choose to do, whether it is to spend more time studying God's word, or to accept the free gift of salvation for the first time. Certainly it's time for celebration. We've sung the song many times in the past, but the words bear a few minutes of study beyond a song:

"You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and hills will burst into song before you, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

That is truly a celebration – not just by us but by all of God's creation. With God's people we say "Blessed is the king who comes in the name of the Lord! Peace in heaven and glory in the highest!" And if we don't say anything, then the very stones will cry out. This is what Christ assured us in Luke chapter 19. And I remember a friend saying how embarrassing that would have been! God's people kept quiet, so the stones had to shout out in our place.

And there is another celebration too. I mentioned that the seed that the sower sows can be choked by the thorns and the weeds as it is in the parable. Yet there is another magnificent promise of the last days in the last verse of the passage.

Instead of the thorn bush will grow the pine tree.

Instead of briars the myrtle will grow.

This will be for the LORD's renown, for an everlasting sign, which will not be destroyed.

So we see that for the Lord's glory and his name, there will be no more weeds. In the place of the useless thorns and briars we have the pine tree and the myrtle. The pine tree is an important tree for timber, and indeed for celebration. You can see a celebration pine tree behind me here tonight. Elsewhere, there was a tradition for myrtle to be used in the other great celebration: marriage. I've previously mentioned the imagery of Christ as bridegroom and the Church as his bride, and I'm sure that the celebration of a wedding is done better with myrtle than with a brier patch.

So let us join together in a journey that starts with an invitation to water and milk and ends with the celebration of the wedding feast of the Lamb of God.