

# **Followers of the Way**

## **The challenges we face**

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### **Isaiah 43: 1 - 21**

Our first FOTW service was on 17<sup>th</sup> October, one year ago tomorrow. We began it with some trepidation on my part. You'll remember, of course, that churches had been closed over lockdown and had begun to reopen only in June/July 2020. But a lot of churches continued to hold services online after that, and I joined such a service in the summer of 2021. The visiting speaker, a senior clergyman, was praised for his work in promoting inter-faith relations, and I have to confess that I found that profoundly depressing, because I knew his approach included an openness to Muslims joining in Christian worship, along with prayers to Allah, in church. Now it goes without saying, of course, that as Christians we are called to love and respect all, but to incorporate other belief systems into our worship in a misguided attempt to affirm all faiths as of equal value is not 'enlightenment'. It's apostasy, and a sin against the Holy Spirit.

So, as said, I found the service profoundly depressing, and it struck me that many people, for this, as well as for a lot of other reasons, had been feeling disaffected from the Anglican Church for a long time ... so the idea came to me to set up our own online service, for all those who felt betrayed and cast adrift – as I was feeling –and who wanted, in fellowship with others, to recover the faith.

But I wasn't sure if this was of God, or just my own rather loopy idea, so I sent an email round to the people who later became core members of the team, asking them what they thought and if they would pray. Well, from the beginning they were hugely supportive and immediately said, yes, they felt this was of the Lord and they wanted to be a part of it. So the next thing was to send out a VfJUK mailing, asking others if they would like to take part too. Amazingly, we had around 500 people express interest ... so we thought, okay, we'll give it a couple of months trial, to see if this really is of the Lord or not. And if it's not working, we'll stop.

Well, that was a year ago and, as we've tried to follow the Lord's leading, He's blessed us incredibly. For a start, He's not just brought the most amazing group of people together, but, beyond all expectation, He's built us up as a community – as family. I know all of us on the team feel a real closeness to everyone, and there seems to be a genuine concern for each other that's mind-blowing. That's really taken us by surprise – because I don't think any of us really imagined that could happen online. Most of all, there's been a sense of the vibrancy of the Spirit, and of our being led. It really has been remarkable, so we wanted, especially, to give thanks today – but also to draw breath and look ahead. Because I believe the Lord has plans for us, for FOTW. Without any shadow of doubt, He's working out His purposes for this nation – for the world – and He's doing a new thing. We have, I believe, a part to play in that.

Our reading today is from Isaiah, and it acknowledges, without flinching, the suffering and challenges of the times. From chapter 40 onwards, the text of Isaiah clearly indicates that Jerusalem has fallen and that the people are in exile in Babylon. For many, after all that had happened, that would have left a sense of hopelessness – God had abandoned them. But, following the dire warnings of punishment for sin and judgment, that had been a hallmark of earlier chapters, now there comes a new note. In the midst of all the anguish and pain, the Sovereign Lord God proclaims protection for His chosen people, and deliverance. And they have been chosen, He makes clear, not for any merit on their part, but because He has singled them out, from the start, as His chosen instrument for the redemption of the whole of humanity.

Without any doubt, the Israelites had sinned and been unfaithful, and had fully deserved what they got. Jerusalem had fallen as a direct result of their idolatry and their feeble attempts to preserve national independence by forging unwise political alliances. They had rejected God. But what we are to understand now is that, throughout, God's faithfulness never wavered. Despite all they had done, the Jews remained God's chosen people, under His protection, and because of that, and His plans, He would deliver them. So now, v.1, God says, 'Do not fear (whatever is going on), for I have redeemed you; I have called you by name, you are mine.' And whatever happens, He promises to uphold them, saying, 'When you pass through the waters, I will be with you; and through the rivers, they shall not overwhelm you; when you walk through fire you shall not be burned...'

These are promises of blessing, help and salvation to a people overwhelmed by the sheer awfulness of their predicament. And God could do this, they knew, if they thought back to their history, because this was exactly what He'd done before, leading the people out of bondage in Egypt. But what God, through Isaiah, proclaims now is far more than just the promise of deliverance. Along with the promise of protection and reassurance that He's with them, and looking out for them, comes the announcement of something wholly new. V.18 'Do not remember the former things, or consider the things of old. I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?'

The book of Isaiah covers a long period, from around 740 to 686 BC, and it centres on the southern kingdom of Judah, extending across the reigns of 4 kings; Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz and Hezekiah. As we know, it describes an exceptionally turbulent time in Israel's history, that saw the total destruction of the kingdom the 12 tribes had fought so hard to build up. But the people who returned to Jerusalem from Babylon were very different from those who had been taken into exile. Most of all, they had learnt the profound lesson that Yahweh really was sovereign, and that He meant what He said. You didn't mess with God, and never again would they go after, or even allow space for worship of, foreign gods. This was actually for the Jews a lightbulb moment, that would prepare the way, in time, for the birth of the true king, Jesus Christ, whose kingdom – unlike that of David, their greatest king up to that point – would endure forever. So this chapter, Isaiah 43, looks forward to the restoration of the Jews to Jerusalem, but more profoundly, it looks forward to the coming of the One who is foretold.

'I am about to do a new thing ...'

There is so much more at stake in these verses than just the return of a rather forlorn bunch of exiles to their home. This is reiteration of God's immutable and unchanging plan, when He will finally and forever win us back from Satan's hold.

And this is where we are today. The times are frightening and dire. None of us know what's going to happen next, but we can all see there are bad times ahead, for which, humanly speaking, we don't have any answers. Whether it's Covid, financial collapse ... war... we don't know what to do. But be encouraged and trust, because God is close. Very close, and He is working out His plan ... finally and forever to win us back ... and He says to those of us who know and follow Him, 'Do not fear ... I have called you by name, you are mine.'

These are serious times, not just because what's going on at the moment is pretty scary, but because the fate of the world hangs in balance. There is a spiritual battle raging in the heavens, and we are at a turning point, and the eternal fate of every last man, woman and child on the planet is at stake.

Over the last century, things have got increasingly bad as, more and more, we've said we're in control ... forget God, we can do what we want! We've even reframed morality, saying 'sin' is good, and goodness is sin ... all in our worship of the new god, 'Self', and our hubris has brought judgment. Our rebellion and wrongheadedness is why the world is in such a mess at the moment, and God won't allow it to continue any longer. So we're going through a period of cleansing, when all that is not of God is being shaken to the surface and will be removed. And on the back of that, God says, 'See, I am about to do a new thing...'

I believe FOTW is a part of that *new thing*. But we're not just some kind of esoteric protection group, banded together so that we can come out safely the other end. We are called by the Lord to be a beacon, and to go out and search for the lost – for those caught in the darkness and who can't see. That's what the Days of Prayer are about ... Our call now is to search after the lost, and bring them safely home. So whatever the future holds, let's trust in our Saviour, who promises to be with us till the end of the age, and let's face the challenges ahead with courage ... rejoicing in the privilege of being called to serve at this time.

The battle belongs to the Lord, and we go at His command. But 'go', under His banner, we must.