

## Isaiah 9:7

### **The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.**

Organised religion is in near-terminal decline in Britain

- Believing parents have only a 50:50 chance of passing on belief to their offspring
- By contrast, parents without faith are successful
- In producing a new generation of non-believers
- Salutory words from an internet article quoting a recent report in the *Daily Telegraph*

The report, based on a study undertaken by the University of Manchester

- Observed that children are only half as likely as their parents
- To say that institutional religion (church attendance) is important to them
- The report also suggested that belief in God is declining faster than church attendance
- As a society, we are at an advanced stage of secularisation

We can weigh this new research against the 'believing without belonging' theory

- The idea that religious belief is robust even though church going is in decline
- The Church of England response was that parental influence
- is not the only way to come to faith
- and that across the board, Church of England congregation had recently grown by 1%

What are we to make of all of this?

- Some people are inevitably suspicious of surveys and reports
- So let's do some observation of our own – let's simply look out of our windows
- Or through that other window on the world (the TV) – can we fail to conclude
- As a society, we are at an advanced stage of secularisation?

I offered as a candidate for the Methodist ministry in the church year 1979-80

- During that year the *Methodist Recorder* ran an article about church decline
- Saying that if the present trends continued that by the year 2023
- There would be no Methodist Church
- I remember the year because that is the year that I am 65 years old

All these years later I have to report that in terms of decline we are bang on course

- The age profile of our congregations is such that even to hold our own
- We would have to run to stand still
- I am not ruling out that in the future there will still be some stronger congregations
- But I am forced to accept that we will probably not be the national church of the past

The familiar words, so often read in carol services, from Isaiah 9

- Were words first spoken to a hopeful remnant from a faithless people
- No one is more delighted than me to be in a church that is doing reasonably well
- But even in those circumstances, if we are realistic, we must realise
- That we are at best a hopeful remnant from a faithless people
- But it is the last verse of the passage that caught my attention
- 'The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this' (Isaiah 9:7)

It's a verse that is so very easy to pass over – as if it is just a formal closing phrase

- but the great reminder is that God is in control – things are in his hands
- and in this oracle, Isaiah shows that God is working by giving them

I A NEW LIGHT

II A NEW CHILD

III A NEW KING

I A NEW LIGHT

The international and national situation at the time of Isaiah was not good

- it is the time of the divided kingdom and Israel in the north and Judah in the south
- are both threatened by the expansion of the Assyrian Empire
- to the nation Isaiah has brought a message of doom and gloom (8:19-22)
- but there is a reason for this message

The first king of Israel was Saul, but when God no longer spoke to him

- (for Saul had already been faithless and God was speaking to David)
- Saul sought out a witch (1 Samuel 28:6-8)
- The spine-chilling story of Saul's consultation with the Witch of Endor
- Raises a number of questions that are difficult for us to answer
- Nevertheless, the witch, so it seems, was able to call up Samuel from the grave

The rationalistic (so-called 'enlightened' mind) simply writes off stories of witches

- As the superstitious fables of the unenlightened mind
- This, of course, is not helped by what we traditionally call 'fairy stories'
- Which contain frequent references to fairies, witches and wizards
- But this is not that kind of story – there is no fun, no obvious moral
- And no happy triumph of good over evil – it is not Sleeping Beauty or Cinderella

I am not the kind of person who sees demons on every corner

- But I am certainly not denying the presence, personality or darkness of evil
- Neither am I denying the legacy of darkness that dealings with evil leave

Some years ago I was playing football for a team in South London

- When I was approached by one of my team-mates who asked me to visit his home
- Because his wife said that the house was haunted
- A colleague and I went along but although I asked lots of questions
- We could not seem to get to the bottom of it and were talking over a cup of tea
- Suddenly, the young woman said that she had done tarot cards in the haunted room

The troubling thing about the incident was that she did not realise tarot cards were occult

- In our society today there are so many things that seem to me to be oppressive
- And even Christian people seem to be taken in by them
- I won't give a long list now – save to say that we have to be wise as serpents
- And innocent as doves – use our spiritual antennae, practise discernment
- And if you are in the slightest doubt about anything – ask

Saul, the King, the nation's earthly leader consulted a witch and spiritual darkness came

- No wonder then that Isaiah reminds the people to enquire of God (8:19)
- And not the dead on behalf of the living
- The occult darkness (Isaiah 8) is due to people's reaction to the hiding of God's face
- The law and testimony (8:16 and 8:20), that is the Word of God, gives light

You may counter that Great Britain today is not a nation in spiritual darkness

- But I am going to take some convincing – things might not appear so bad
- In more affluent city suburbs – but what is happening at the heart of the city?
- What is happening at the heart of our nation?
- And what is happening in secret that brings darkness on our land?

The people are 'walking in darkness' – living out their daily lives in darkness and death

- Despite the fact that Israel had rejected God's word through Isaiah (8:11, 17, 19-20)
- God has planned to give his people light again, though no time is given
- Instead the passage is given in the 'prophetic perfect'
- 'the people walking in darkness have seen a great light' (Isaiah 9:2)
- although it sounds like something that happened in the past it is going to happen
- this way of expressing things is the 'prophetic purpose'
- it is because God has said it will happen that it is as absolutely sure to take place
- as if it had already happened

The gloom and anguish that afflicted the people are the inevitable results of past events

- there is nothing really that they can do for themselves
- how futile it would have been to go on a course of national self-improvement
- Isaiah proclaims that it is in the hands of God – he will accomplish his purpose
- Therefore their hope is based on nothing less than divine intervention

The great news is that there really is light at the end of the tunnel for Israel

- Freedom from foreign domination seemed as unlikely as victory for Gideon (Jdg. 7)
- Had seemed on the day of Midian's defeat, when 300 Israelites routed a great army
- A day will come when war boots and military uniforms will be burned
- And the House of David will be restored
- The true source of light is God's word – the Israelites had the law and the testimony
- But a greater light was coming for Isaiah spoke also of:

## II A NEW CHILD

For to us a child is born, to us a son is given, and the government  
will be on his shoulders. And he will be called Wonderful  
Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.  
(Isaiah 9:6-7)

The little word 'for' is very important here

- All the wonderful events of which the prophet speaks must have adequate cause
- And the cause is the birth of the child

We must not forget the word concerning the child in Isaiah 7:14

- The young woman will be with child and give birth to a son
- We recognised that this promise had an immediate fulfilment
- But that the immediate fulfilment was only the first stage of a far greater fulfilment
- ‘the virgin will be with child and give birth to a son’

This time (Isaiah 9) there is no time scale of immediate fulfilment

- but it is more than likely that in terms of the far greater fulfilment
- the prophet is speaking of the same child – the first person plural ‘us’ makes the link
- if the child of Isaiah 7 typifies the ultimate divine Christ
- the child of Isaiah 9 is that Christ

It was a custom of that time to give a child of royal birth throne names

- it is not entirely clear how we should read these
- but it seems likely that Isaiah intended us to understand the child to have four names
- ‘Wonderful Counsellor’ suggests wisdom
- ‘Mighty God’ describes divinity and power
- ‘Everlasting Father’ is an unusual name for a child – describing his fatherly care
- ‘Prince of Peace’ is just the name that the people need when threatened with war

The people walking in darkness, living in the shadow of death are promised:

- I A NEW LIGHT
- II A NEW CHILD
- III A NEW KING

Of the increase of his government and peace there will be no end. He will reign on David’s throne and over his kingdom, establishing and upholding it with justice and righteousness from that time on and for ever. The zeal of the LORD Almighty will accomplish this.  
(Isaiah 9:6-7)

The word ‘increase’ combined with the phrase ‘his (David’s) kingdom’

- suggest that the prophet is speaking of one far greater
- than a particularly great king of Judah
- the picture of the rule of righteousness and peace is reminiscent of Melchizedek
- a king and priest who ruled at Jerusalem long before King David (Genesis 14:18)
- but who will come to be the same kind of rule as Melchizedek?

No wonder that John begins his gospel with these words:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. Through him all things were made; without him nothing was made that has been made. In him was life, and that life was the light of men. The light shines in the darkness, but the darkness has not understood it.  
(John 1:1-5)

The prophecy concerning the light, the child and the king is fulfilled in Jesus

- the one who came to be ‘the light of the world’; the one who is
- Wonderful Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace
- And the one who is the child of royal birth, the Son of David
- Heir to the divine promise of an everlasting kingdom and universal throne
- On whom the Spirit of the Lord will rest so that he achieves the aims of the kingdom

The Israelites saw the Kingdom of David as the earthly expression of the Kingdom of Heaven

- The New Testament invites us to see all that is promised fulfilled in Jesus Christ
- Son of David, divine King, Lord of Heaven and Earth

And so, we must make two responses

- The first response is one of repentance
- To come before God admitting that we have often preferred darkness to light
- Because our deeds are evil
- The issue facing Israel was not that God was unable to fulfil his promises
- Or that he was unfaithful to them
- but that they (the people) had eliminated themselves from God’s agenda
- this is followed by a process of judging and cleansing
- so that his ultimate purpose can be achieved

The second response is one of prayer

- Only a miracle can bring the light, restore the joy, or establish power and authority
- The task is just too big for us, it is impossible – but nothing is impossible with God
- The LORD Almighty (the LORD of Hosts – Jehovah Sabaoth) is God’s battle name
- The invocation of the old battle name for God reminds the people of the victories
- At the Red Sea, at Jericho, at Midian
- Maybe at the end of the oracle we just hear the murmured response of the crowd
- *May the Zeal of the LORD of Hosts accomplish this*