

Returning Home from Exile

1. Returning Home

- In March 1973, 591 American prisoners of war who had been held captive for months and years in North Vietnam made the long anticipated trip home
- Waiting at the air force base were the wives, sons, daughters, parents, brothers and sisters of these POWs
- When the rear door of the plane opened and the ramp was lowered ... the
 - first POW walked down the ramp and briskly saluted the welcoming officer and the American flag
 - Others started walking down the ramp ... some on crutches ... some with a limp in their gait ... many gaunt and languid
 - Some kissed the ground
 - The cheers grew louder ... the tears flowed more freely
 - But the families would have to wait a little while longer
 - The salutes had to be rendered, the welcome home words had to be spoken, and the speeches had to be made
- And there they stood
 - These men who had not seen their loved ones for an eternity but who now could see them standing 40, 50 meters from them
- Then finally ... finally, the long wait was over
 - Suddenly these men ran or hopped as fast as their injuries and crutches would let them towards their loved ones
 - Their loved ones could not run fast enough towards them
 - It was a scene of love, gladness and joy
 - For these men ... it was finally time to
 - hold their children once again in their arms -- some for the first time
 - to touch their wives' lips
 - to hug their loved ones after such a long time away
- Finally they were home
- This picture of being away and then returning home with joy and gladness is the big idea of Isaiah 35
- Isaiah who was looking forward to a time when God would rescue his people through his Messiah

- Because Christians believe that Jesus is that promised Messiah ... we've been looking at these passages from Isaiah to help us understand the richness of what Christmas means and who it was born in the manger
- The big idea of this passage the promise of a joyful return home from exile for God's people
- Context is
 - Isaiah is looking forward and anticipating a time when God's would be overpowered by the Babylonians and taken into exile
 - But he also sees that at some point in the future, God would act to save his people and bring them home

2. Exile and home for Israel

- Take a look at the passage
- v1-2 open with the creation rejoicing and shouting for joy as God brings life to the parched desert
 - Lebanon, Carmel, and Sharon were famous for their fertility, trees and foliage
 - Isaiah is saying a time is coming when the desert will be transformed to be like them
 - Life in abundance will come to a place where there is normally no life
- You see Isaiah has been foretelling of a time when
 - Israel and Judah will be conquered
 - The royal dynasty destroyed
 - The people of God humiliated and carted off to exile
 - It would be like Israel had was dead ...
- But Isaiah also foresees a time when life would return and God would revive his people
 - And the glory of the Lord will be revealed as he does his work of bringing life to the dead
- In v3-4 we see this vision of a changed world should put strength back into God's fearful people, as they realise that God is coming
- He's coming to transform ... but also to judge and save
- While they wait for this Isaiah is saying
 - Be encouraged
 - Be strengthened

- The Lord is coming and he will do this
 - Therefore his people should take heart at what the Lord has promised he will do

- In v5-7 the same power which transformed the nature in verses 1-2 will also bring miraculous renewal for people
 - Eyes of blind opened
 - Ears of deaf unstopped
 - Lamé leap like a deer
 - Mute tongue shout with joy
- In other words ... no more disability, diseases, ageing ... no more death

- And not only will there be physical healing but there will also be spiritual healing ... as portrayed in the image in v 6-7 of the water streaming out into the world to bring life and vitality to a humanity and world that is in the wilderness
 - As in most cultures, water is so often a metaphor for life
 - Without water, there is no life – just death
- These images show a rejuvenating river of life which brings restoration, healing and renewal

- In other words ... when the Messiah comes ... he will bring total healing – both physical and spiritual

- Then in v8-10 Isaiah says the God is going to provide a highway for his people
 - What's a highway do?
 - It's a big straight wide road that allows people to get quickly and safely to their destination
 - It's the difference between travelling to Melbourne via Hume Hwy vs travelling via coast on Princess hwy
 - Highways are the most direct, safest, and quickest way to go straight to place you are travelling to

- Where's this highway heading?
 - To Zion > temple mount in Jerusalem > temple where God symbolically dwelt among his people
 - In other words ... it is the picture of a coming home to the Lord from exile
 - Back into his presence

- Back into relationship with him
- Back into a place of safety, peace and rest
- And as you expect ... there will be great joy and gladness when God's people experience that return home from exile to enjoy and revel in God's work of recreation and renewal
- So it's a promise to God's people that he would bring them home from exile

- This theme of exile and home coming run right throughout Bible
 - See it in the OT with God's people enslaved in Egypt and God saving them and bringing them home to the Promised land
 - See it in the books of Ezra / Nehemiah with God's people returning home to Jerusalem after exile in Babylon

- Seems to me that this experience of Israel being in exile and deeply desiring to come home is the story of whole human race
 - Beginning of Bible in Genesis > we see A & E lost their home > turned away from God > kicked out of Eden / out of their home
 - End of Bible > Revelation > God recreating a new Eden > new garden city of God coming down out of heaven > where all God's people are finally gathered to him for eternity

- Teaching of Bible is we are all in exile
 - Spiritually we are homeless, but God's promise is he'll bring his people home

- What does it mean to be spiritually homeless ... to be in exile
- To understand that we need to understand what it means to be homeless
 - You know the phrase 'a house is not a home'
 - We know the difference between a house and home
- If you've ever moved house before you'll know it takes time to make it a home
 - Sure you might have a bed to sleep in > a roof over your head
 - Somewhere to prepare food and shower etc
 - But it actually takes time to turn that house into your home
- A home is where everything fits
 - Home is where everything is where you want it / where it suits you
 - When you've established you home ... home becomes a haven ...
 - It's a place where you come to rest

- A home **land** is a place

- Where you don't have to struggle to understand the language
- Where you understand the culture
- Food and customs make sense to you

- Homelessness is brutal
 - We can't imagine what it would be like living on the street
 - Literally with no home to go to
 - No toilet > no shower > getting dirtier and dirtier day by day
 - Unable to wash your clothes
 - Few or no possessions
- Living homeless is destructive
 - De-humanising
 - Emotionally debilitating

- When you read the Bible and you look closely at Isaiah 35 you see our real home is not a place ... but is actually with God
 - The significance of the exiles returning in Isaiah 35 is not that they are returning to Jerusalem ... but returning to God
- God is our home
 - We were built to worship and serve God
 - If we're doing anything else ... we're restless, we're homeless
 - It doesn't really fit what we are designed to do
- If you or I live for anything other than God, even if you believe in God – like career or family or wealth or a particular cause ... what you're doing is turning something that isn't a home into a home
 - And you can't ... because they can never give that complete sense of home, comfort, security and rest
 - There will always be a sense of struggle ... not being quite right

- Spiritually, it's like living in a cardboard box down at Circular Quay in the middle of winter
 - Those things are good things ... but they're not our true home

- And so when we don't centre on him and make him the most important thing for us ... we experience spiritual homelessness

- Reason is this ...
 - In the world God created, human beings were made for to be with God in paradise
 - Eden was our home with God

- But because we decided we were going to be our own masters / our own lords ... we lost home
- We were exiled

- The Bible tells us that we have lost home ...
 - Because we turned from him ... we're living away from home in which there is aging, disease, pain, blindness, and lameness and death

- Some people will say
 - "Of course, that's normal, we're the product of natural selection / survival of the fittest"
- But we know better
 - Deep down we know there's more than that
 - We know there's a home we're searching for
 - Because we know this world doesn't meet our deepest desires ... it doesn't suit us ... it doesn't fit right
- So the reality is we are in exile ... both internally and externally > physically and spiritually
 - We desperately need to be brought home

- How?
 - Answer is Christmas

3. Exile and Home for Jesus

- When Jesus Christ came into the world on that very first Christmas ... he came as the Messiah who would fulfill Isaiah 35
 - That's why when John the Baptist sends to Jesus and asks ...
 - "Are you the one to come ..."
 - He's asking ... "are you the one Isaiah spoke about?"
 - "Are you the one who will make straight the path to the Lord?"

- And Jesus answer is emphatic
 - Luke 7:22 *"Go back and report to John what you have seen and heard: The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cured, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor.*
 - He's saying ... I am the one who will bring that time of restoration, renewal and revival for God
 - I'm the one who will make Isaiah 35 happen

- When you think about it ... Christmas is about homelessness and exile
 - We so often sentimentalise Christmas with nativity plays and cute pictures of baby Jesus
 - We love singing songs of 'Little Lord Jesus asleep on the hay' ... and we think hay is so soft and sweet smelling that we really think it was better for Joseph and Mary to be sleeping out in the barn rather than in a motel

- But the story of Christmas is so much rougher than that
 - Jesus born on the road > not in Nazareth where his parents are from
 - They had to go to Bethlehem for the census
 - He wasn't born in a house > there was no room available to them
 - They didn't choose to sleep in the stable > they had no other option > they were sleeping rough

- When you look at Christmas ... you see its actually a pattern that runs right throughout Jesus life
 - Matt 8:20 *"Foxes have holes and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head."*
 - Jesus was born homeless, he lived homeless, and at the end of his life he went to the cross
 - On the cross ... didn't just say "My God my God I'm hurting"
 - He said "My God my God, why have you forsaken me"

- You see Jesus Christ was homeless and exiled ... from his birth until his death

- What's going here at the cross?
 - Jesus Christ is ransoming others so they can come home
 - You see Isaiah says in 35:9-10 it is only the ransomed and redeemed who return home to the Lord
 - In Mark 10:45 Jesus said *"For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."*
 - That's what he's doing > paying the ransom

- What's a ransom?
 - It means to be bought at a price

- **Illustration – Raoul Silva**
- Watching James Bond film Skyfall recently
 - In Skyfall, Raoul Silva is the bad guy

- He's an former double O agent, gone rogue, seeking to bring down MI6 and seek retribution on his former boss 'M' played by Judi Dench
- At one point when Silva is imprisoned in MI6 M explains to Bond what happened
- Silva has been working for M in Hong Kong but had started acting outside of his authority
- During the handover of HK to the Chinese, M negotiated the release of 6 British agents in exchange for the renegade Silva
- Thus the agents were redeemed, the ransom price was paid ... and the cost was Silva

- When Jesus Christ went to the cross ... he paid the ransomed price for you and I > you and I were set free because Christ handed himself over
- You see ... because of our sin, our rebellion, our rejection of God ...
 - this meant the human race was expelled from Eden ... kicked out of home ... made homeless and in exile from God ...
 - But Jesus Christ came into the world on that very first Christmas and
 - experienced homelessness ...
 - and at the very end of his life he was exiled on the cross as he cried out "My God My God why have you forsaken me"
- Why?
 - So that you and I can be saved from our homelessness and be brought home to God

- You see on the cross Jesus is getting the cosmic homelessness that we deserve so that you and I can be brought home
 - He left the ultimate home in heaven ... came and experienced homelessness and exile in this world so that we can come home
 - Home to restoration with God
 - Home to a renewed world
 - Home to where God brings revival to us physically and spiritually

4. Exile and home for Us

- Now when it comes to Christmas ... it seems to me most Australians miss all that
 - They fail to understand that Christmas is the event that made our spiritual homecoming possible
 - They don't grasp that without Christmas, we're all in exile
 - That we're without a true home and desperately searching for one

- Make no mistake ... most people get very excited about Christmas

- They like the food, and the presents and the time off work and time relaxing and hanging out with family
- But when it comes to the reason for the season ... when it comes to the meaning behind all that ... well Christmas is merely tolerated
 - They put up with
 - Nativity scenes
 - Carols
 - Going to church
- Secular Christmas ... fun
 - But the Christmas story ... well that's just something you tolerate along the way

- And if that's true for so many people ... then why do we tolerate it?
 - If it's not true ... if it's not meaningful ... then why do we put up with it?

- Maybe the reason we tolerate it is because deep down we know it's true!
 - If it didn't happen it means nothing!
 - But if it did happen ... if God did come down and become homeless that we could be brought home ... then it makes all the difference in the world!

- One of the ways this truly makes a difference to us is recognising that joy and gladness only found when we come home to the Lord
 - Did you notice Isaiah 35 begins with gladness and rejoicing and it ends with gladness and rejoicing
 - In the middle is the promise of God bringing home to himself the ransomed and redeemed
- In other words ... true joy in life is only ever found in God ... when he's our home
- And so if you or I are making anything other than God our home ... then we'll never experience that joy and gladness that Isaiah is speaking about
 - What's the main thing that gives you meaning in life?
 - What's the main thing that gives you your significance and security?
- Is it ...
 - Your family? For many Australians, that's that thing we live for?
 - Your career? Having success at work? Being recognised by your peers?
 - Your making money?
 - A relationship / a person?

- Whatever it is ... if there's anything you love more than God ... anything that more important to you than God ...
 - it's like living in a cardboard box at Circular Quay in the middle of winter

- They're all good things ... but those things can never be home for us
 - They can never fulfill us > never satisfy us > never make us feel complete > at rest
 - They will never bring us real joy and gladness that will last
 - Because they are going to let you down and desert you and disappoint you ... if you persist in making anything other than God your 'home' in life
 - It's like living on the street ...
- So that's the first thing ... if you want true and lasting joy and gladness ... you need to make God your home

- Second thing is ... how do you do that?
- Trust 100% in the work of Jesus Christ
 - Notice in Isaiah 35:8 says 'A highway will be there'
 - In other words ... the way to come home to the Lord will be provided for them
 - They don't make their own way home
 - They don't pave the way
 - God does it for them
- And the way he does it for them and for us is through sending his Son into exile on the cross for us

- Christmas tells us that Christianity is very different from any other religion in the world
 - Other religions say you need to summon up your strength and you do your best to be right with God
 - Christmas says Christianity is the opposite
 - We could never rise up ... God had to come down
 - He had to come down and do what we couldn't do ourselves
 - He comes down and becomes homeless ... so we can be saved and brought home
- We have to trust in Christ who redeemed us on the cross

- The final thing that is relevant to us ... is this passage gives us hope in the midst of disappointments we experience ... whether at Christmas time or at any time in life

- While Christmas can be a time of great joy and refreshment and celebration ...
- It can also be a time of great heart ache
 - Some of you don't have family to celebrate Christmas with
 - Some of you your families are separated and alienated from one another
 - Others of you don't have the money to celebrate Christmas as you would like because you're under financial stress
 - Some of you Christmas only serves to remind you of the loved one who is no longer there ... and all those things are painful and not joyful at all
- But what Isaiah 35 reminds us is ... that God has promised a time when all that heartache and all those disappointments and all that pain we experience and feel will be no more
 - For he has provided a highway to a place where there will be eternal life, abundance, restoration and renewal
 - And those who have come to Jesus Christ as their Messiah **will** experience the joy and gladness for eternity that we deeply crave
- And so Isaiah 35 is like a refreshing oasis for us ... where we can pause along the way and be strengthened and encouraged by its message
 - That Christ will come and bring home those he has ransomed and redeemed
 - For all who come to him ... eternal joy and gladness and God himself are ahead
 - And all of it guaranteed and assured for us ... because Christ has already come
 - 2000 years ago as a baby
- On that very first Christmas Jesus Christ came
 - and left his home ...
 - went into exile and became homeless
 - so that he bring you home from exile
- At the very end of time he will come again and fulfill all that Isaiah 35 tells us
 - He will make the new heavens and earth a place where we will finally be home

- The redeemed, those who walk there, the one the Lord has rescued will say ... "at last I have come home".

PRAY