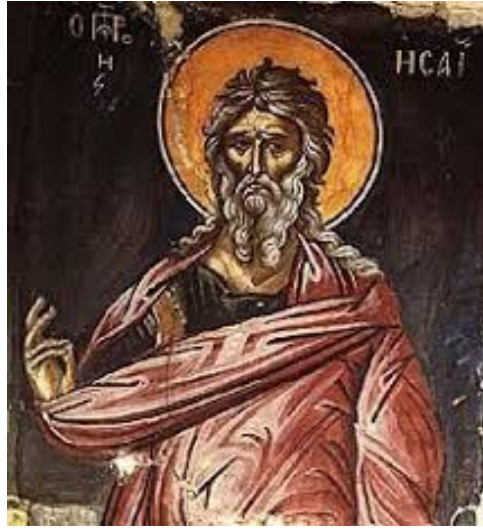


The Prophets of Old: *Isaiah*



From the scroll of the Prophet Isaiah 40:1 "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem, and cry to her that she has served her term, that her penalty is paid, that she has received from the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

This is the last sermon in a four-part series which I have been preaching this Advent entitled *The Prophets of Old*, because the ideas and images of the ancient prophets play such a large part in our expectations about the coming Messiah, and no one's words and reflections are more important here, than those of the prophet Isaiah.

Isaiah marks the beginning of his career as a prophet with the death of King Uzziah, who was a strong leader of the Southern Kingdom of Judah in the eight century b.c.e.

The Assyrian Empire was on the rise in the East at that time, threatening the people of Israel. In Isaiah's words, "(the new king's) heart and the heart of his people shook as the trees of the forest shake before the wind." Isaiah's message in response to this new power arising in the East was a simple one; "Trust in God; be quiet and keep calm." "In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and confidence shall be your strength" (30.15).

As with the other prophets, Isaiah sometimes engaged in dramatic signs to illustrate his message. For instance, on one occasion he went out through the city of Jerusalem naked and barefoot, to signify that Assyria would lead peoples away into exile, clad only in the loincloth of prisoners of war. And like the prophet Hosea, Isaiah used the names of children as signs to the people. For example, Isaiah named his own first child, *Shear-yashub*, which means "A remnant shall return," a clear sign of hope in the face of the Assyrian deportation in the north.

Then Isaiah prophesized that another child would be born, of the line of King David, who would be called *Emmanuel*, or "God is with us." Then the people who live in darkness would see a great light. "For unto us a child is born, to us a son is given; And the government will be upon his shoulder, and his name will be called 'Wonderful

Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace” (9.6). Although Christians would later see Jesus as the fulfillment of this prophecy, it would appear that Isaiah was referring to the impending birth of good king Hezekiah, who led a religious reform after the Assyrians laid siege on Jerusalem, a siege which was suddenly abandoned and Assyrian domination averted. Thus Isaiah’s prophecies of simply trusting in God were well remembered and cherished by later generations, although the prophet himself disappeared from the scene and nothing more is known of him.

However a hundred and twenty years later when the Babylonian Empire rose to prominence in that region and laid siege to the city of Jerusalem, the prophecies of Isaiah were rekindled and fed the resistance to the prophecies of doom coming from Amos and Hosea. If they only trusted in God, God would save them; that was the message of Isaiah. Only this time, God did not save them. The Babylonians, as you know, after a long and terrible siege, eventually broke through the fortified walls of the city and utterly destroyed the city of Jerusalem and the great temple of Solomon. Then they carted away the surviving Jewish people to exile in Babylon. There in Babylon, an unknown prophet added his own words to the scroll of

Isaiah, and for want of a better name, this unknown later prophet is often referred to as Second Isaiah. In spite of his anonymity, many acclaim him as one of the greatest, if not the greatest prophet of the Old Testament.

Influenced by the reassuring words of Ezekiel and Jeremiah, Second Isaiah prophesized to the Jews in captivity in Babylon with lyrical images of hope and rebuilding. Pardon, deliverance, restoration, and grace are the characteristic notes of his message. From the beginning to the end, the prophecy of Second Isaiah is an exultant proclamation of good news. Captives are told that deliverance is on the way. The brokenhearted are comforted. The prisoners are to be set free. Every poem is filled with the excitement and expectancy of great events about to come to pass. Here is found that voice crying, make straight in the desert a highway for our God, to bring the mountains low and raise up the valleys for a new Exodus, an easy exodus on level ground, not as was the Exodus of old, as the Jews are set to return to their homeland. Here is found promises of a new Davidic king to rule over them and even a new Creation, where the lion will lay down with the lamb, and the child will play over the asp's den. Indeed in Second Isaiah, Israel's redemption was part of the salvation of the whole world, for Israel was to become a

light to the nations. And the means of this salvation in Second Isaiah's words is a mysterious Servant of the Lord, a man of sorrows, one acquainted with grief, a suffering servant:

"Behold my servant, whom I uphold, my chosen, in whom my soul delights; I have put my spirit upon him, he will bring forth justice to the nations, He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice. He will not fail or be discouraged till he has established justice in the earth; and the coastlands wait for his law" (42.1-4). Here is the most clearly defined hopes for a Jewish Messiah, for an Anointed One, from the root of Jesse, a new Davidic king, who would come and save Israel from their captivity in Babylon, and restore them to the Promised Land, and in so doing would save the nations of the whole world. "For all we like sheep have gone astray; we have turned every one to his own way; and God has laid on him the iniquity of us all" (53.6).

For Christians, the poetry of Second Isaiah, most clearly lends language and image to our understanding of Jesus as that Messiah, as that long-expected Suffering Servant who would bring salvation to Israel and to the

world. Here lies the language and images that we have heard so often that we take them for granted, and cannot see or understand them in any other way. In the New Testament, and throughout the history of the Church, Christians have understood the mission of Jesus in the light of the Servant poems of Second Isaiah. Christians are convinced that the vocation of the Servant is realized in Jesus. Through his vicarious death and sacrifice, a new Israel is gathered around him, and the doors of the Kingdom of God are thrown open to all nations. The whole of Israel's history comes to focus and fulfillment in Jesus.

Thus it is perhaps not at all surprising that according to the Christian tradition, Jesus began his public ministry in the synagogue at his home in Nazareth by reading a passage from the scroll of the prophet Second Isaiah. In the words of the Gospel of Luke, "(Jesus) came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up; and he went to the synagogue, as his custom was, on the Sabbath day. And he stood up to read; and there was given to him the book of the prophet Isaiah. He opened the book and found the place where it was written, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty those

who are oppressed, to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord." And (Jesus) closed the book, and gave it back to the attendant, and sat down; and the eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. And (Jesus) began to say to them, "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." (Lk. 4.16ff). AMEN.