

LENT 3 7 MARCH 2010

Isaiah 55:1-9; 1 Corinthians 10:1-13; Luke 13:1-9

“Repent, says the Lord, for the Kingdom of Heaven is at hand.” (Matthew 4:17)

When preparing sermons, one problem is always thinking out how to start, to get attention. The prophet in the passage we read this morning had a dramatic idea. I imagine this message was delivered in a busy market place. ‘Come and get your food and water here, absolutely free. Roll up, roll up!’ If that would sound good here, it sounded even better in a hot country where water was scarce, and could be bought in the market.

Who was this character? Although the passage comes within the book we call Isaiah, the situation belongs to the sixth century B.C., whereas the chapters up to number 40 belong to the eighth century. The earlier part, in which Isaiah was identified, belongs to the period before the capture of Jerusalem by the Chaldeans (Babylonians), and the exile of many of the people. This passage was written to the people who were in exile in Babylon. The writer is addressing a broken and scattered people. After the occupation of their country, many of the more prominent members were deported to Babylon, others had fled to Egypt. The few who remained in occupied Judah (and Israel) were oppressed and the cities destroyed, the land devastated and impoverished. Wherever they had now settled, the Jewish people were ill treated, probably bewildered and certainly demoralised. Some had turned to idolatry, possibly emulating their more prosperous conquerors.

We might expect this prophet to be depressed, or to pronounce the whole situation as God’s judgment on the sins of the people. But ‘instead of depressing it elated him; for he saw in its very prostration a call for Yahweh to intervene. Like Moses in the desert he heard the approach of divine footsteps hastening to save. The heavier the clouds of disbelief about him, the fiercer blazed his fire of faith. Now was the hour for Israel to fulfil its mission in the world.’ (Fleming James)

Without overlooking the faults of his people, Second Isaiah saw that they needed comfort and encouragement. ‘Comfort ye, comfort ye my people saith your God’ These opening words of chapter 40 are known to us through Handel’s Messiah, and characterise his message of hope and encouragement for the future. He sees God acting through non Jewish forces in the shape of Cyrus, king of Persia coming to release the captives and get them back to their homeland, but also, out of their experiences, to rediscover that deep well of faith which was their true destiny. Note that for this prophet, their destiny was to be more than just a special people unto themselves, but that they would be the means of drawing in other peoples, thus far unknown to them.

The passage we read to-day obviously has a close parallel with the encounter of Jesus with the Samaritan woman at the well, which we find in John’s Gospel (John 4), but the other readings to-day encourage us to think about the circumstances of the people, and how the prophet encouraged them to regard their experience of hardship. Yes, the period of exile had been the result of the people making mistakes resulting from their self-seeking ambition, and neglect of God’s expressed wishes for how they should conduct themselves. Yes, their present actions were not in accord with the teaching handed down by the patriarchs and earlier prophets, but the opportunity was now open for them to rediscover something of God’s way and God’s will, to be restored to their homeland and to rebuild their society in accordance with God’s teaching.

In our New Testament readings, we find that the members of the Corinthian church are being chided for possibly envying or copying the ways of the other more numerous members of the community, indulging in the worship of other gods, seeing the immorality which abounded in this bustling seaport, and being warned of the likely consequences. None the less, Paul doesn’t say that natural calamities are inevitable if they do falter, because God is faithful and will not let them be tempted beyond what they can bear, and will provide them with a way out if they are tempted.

Again, in the Gospel, Jesus is asked about incidents in which people have died. Neither is known from any other source, but it seems that some Jews had been massacred by Roman troops whilst worshipping in their own way, and other people had been killed when a building collapsed on them. Had they sinned more than anyone else to deserve what befell? Jesus’ reply was to tell a parable

which shows the love of God, giving sinners the chance to change their ways, rather than to destroy them. Elsewhere, Jesus said; 'He [God] causes his sun to rise on the evil and the good [alike] and sends rain on the righteous and the unrighteous.' (Matthew 5:45)

Thus, in our readings, we have covered people exiled, and living as refugees; people living as a minority in a bustling city, observing others prospering despite their profligate and sinful lives; people massacred while they were at worship; victims of natural disaster. All are situations with which we are familiar through everyday reports on TV, radio and in the press. We regularly pray for the victims, but we often ask, where was God in all this?

'Second Isaiah', from which we read this morning, taught that despite the desperate situation of the people, they were now in a position to turn back to God, to experience comfort, new strength, to have great opportunities now for revival and hope, as God was working for them in ways they couldn't have imagined. Is there a general application of this concept?

Alan Wakely, Secretary of the Central Reader's Council in the Church of England, recently wrote; 'Many of you will know that my day-job is in a convent, and the greatest size of the Order was achieved in the mid 1920s. Why? Well, there were a great many women at that time who could not find a husband because so many men had been killed in the Great War. It would be easy to say that the women became nuns because their preferred option was not open to them – but I reckon much more positively that their vocations to the religious life were entirely genuine, and represented the action of the Holy Spirit in a situation brought about by humankind in killing off so many young men. It is rather sobering to reflect that even when all we present to God is a mess, that he can still use it for good.' (The Reader Winter 2009)

We could think also of the growth of the Franciscan movement during the unemployment in the 1930s, and of other revivals such as the Wesleyan revival at the end of the eighteenth century and early nineteenth century, and the later growth of Episcopal congregations amongst the poorest in Dundee and Glasgow later in the nineteenth century and into the twentieth.

This doesn't account for natural disasters, and while there are many examples always of people finding resources to survive and to help others, or miraculous escapes, the sheer scale of the suffering and the unpredictable consequences, physical and mental, on individuals simply prevent us from finding simple answers. What we can say is that somehow God is there in the suffering, with the victims. The incarnation in itself is evidence that God in sending His Son into the world to live, work, suffer and die, was identifying with humankind in all its frailty.

We can also consider the way in which, as Christians, we are all part of the 'body of Christ'. This is the wider universal and timeless fellowship through which the Spirit of God continues to work. (Hebrews 12:22-24). If this is true, then awareness of need, and prayerful response, is not limited to the areas of crisis but can involve each and every one of us. With modern communications, press, radio, T.V. it's easier to realise this ideal. Of course response and help do not come exclusively from Christian agencies, but then, as Second Isaiah realised, God doesn't limit His activity to one chosen community.

None of these 'answers' are easy, but then we can consider the situation of Job in the Old Testament story. Here was a good man who progressively lost everything, family, wealth and material possessions, and finally his health as well. Friends tried to suggest why it had happened, and he examined his own conscience, often crying out to God in his anguish. In the end God replied, not with an answer to why he was suffering so, but with a glorious vision of God's supremacy and majesty. Job's faith may have been challenged, but was never lost, and in the end was confirmed.

It's right for us to ponder these matters, and to play our part in responding to need and disaster, working prayerfully through situations as they are presented to us, but all the time we are reminded of the words we read in Isaiah this morning 'My thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, says the Lord (Isaiah 55; 8)