

Advent 2 2020
Isaiah 40, Mark 1
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Both our Old Testament reading and our gospel passage today present us with beginnings. Obviously so, in the case of Mark's gospel, from which we heard the first eight verses. Less obviously so, perhaps, with our reading from Isaiah chapter 40. Clearly that is not the beginning of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah. But it is the beginning of the section of that Book which is usually called "Second Isaiah". Broadly speaking, chapters 40 to 55 of Isaiah seem to be a discreet work, a text by an author different from those who produced the rest of the book. The original Isaiah was a prophet in Jerusalem in the 8th century BC. The oracles he left behind seem to have given birth to something of a school so that later texts, written in his prophetic tradition, became included in the book which we now call Isaiah. But within that book, scholars distinguish a number of different authors - most obviously by

dividing the book into the portions ascribed to Isaiah of Jerusalem (the original), Second Isaiah - that's 40 - 55, and Third Isaiah 56-66.

Second Isaiah begins with words familiar to all who know Handel's Messiah. However, that rendering - comfort ye my people - is misleading, since the Lord's words are addressed not to the people, but to the Prophet: it is his task to comfort the Lord's people with his message. And so he does. More specifically than most Old Testament texts, we can date second Isaiah to the end of the period of the Babylonian exile, that fifty-year captivity in the 6th century BC which followed Nebuchadnezzar conquering and destroying Jerusalem, and carrying off many of its inhabitants to exile in Babylon itself. Second Isaiah brings the news that this exile has come to an end. Babylon's days are numbered, and so remarkable is the historical turn around that the conqueror of Babylon, Cyrus the King of Persia, is actually called by the prophet "the anointed of the Lord." Anointed, remember, is what messiah means.

Isaiah 40 - 55 sets out this promise of redemption and liberation, looking back to that first and greatest liberation, the exodus from Egypt. By preparing a highway in the desert by which the exiles can return to rebuild the walls of Jerusalem, God has brought about a new Exodus, set up a new people, brought hope from despair, brought life to those who were dead. It should not surprise us, then, to learn that when the gospel writers sought to introduce the story of Jesus of Nazareth, they made extensive use of the work of Second Isaiah.

Mark's gospel begins by telling us of a beginning. The first line of his text reads, the beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God. Straight away, we are brought up short. What is a gospel? Or the gospel? We might think we know, but Mark is writing something new, something surprising, something unfamiliar. We should of course say the beginning of the good news of Jesus Christ, the Son of God, because that, of course, is what gospel means. If we think back to Handel and

Second Isaiah, we can recall the words “how beautiful are the feet of them who preach the gospel of peace”. This odd phrase - how beautiful are the feet - means something like “how welcome is the messenger”, how marvellous it is to see on the mountain tops the first sign of the runner who is coming with the good news of deliverance. That good news is the good news of peace, for Israel’s warfare is ended. This good news is the good news of a person, Jesus Christ.

But then what of this word Christ? Christos, the anointed one, the messiah – it is hardly a word one would expect to be used as a name. But here we are, being told before we start that the main character in the story we are about to hear is Jesus the messiah – a startling claim. In Isaiah, the title was attached to a military conqueror, and a foreign one at that. Here we are being told that a carpenter from Nazareth is the one by whom the Lord will liberate the nations.

Mark’s next line is “as it is written in Isaiah the prophet, Behold I send my messenger before your

face.” You might not think that odd, but in fact the words come not from Isaiah but from Malachi. The next line – the voice of one crying in the wilderness – is from Isaiah, and that is the main focus of Mark’s emphasis, but the point remains – we are reading, we are hearing, something very strange indeed.

Despite Jesus having been named as the Christ in our first line, the first character we meet is called John. Again, this is someone familiar to us from Christian tradition, but extraordinary in the text itself. John the baptizer, he is called – we call him John the Baptist. But what is a Baptist? One who baptises people, but baptism belongs in the temple precincts, not in the deserts of the Jordan valley. Again Isaiah is our source, and again we are surprised by what we find. The evangelists agree that John’s is the voice of one crying in the wilderness, prepare the way of the Lord. In Second Isaiah, the voice seems to be that of the prophet, and the way being prepared is not the path for the coming messiah, but the highway which is being built by the Lord so that his people can return.

Remember that prophecy in the Old Testament is much more about forth telling than it is about fore-telling. When the evangelists relate the stories of John and of Jesus to the words of Second Isaiah, they are not saying: look, what a clever prediction the prophets made. What they are saying is, the Lord's work to which the prophets witnessed has come upon us again. And this time the good news and the deliverer himself are one and the same: the good news is Jesus, the medium is the message.

Second Isaiah is writing of something which, it seems, has yet to happen. It is promised, perhaps inevitable, but not yet fulfilled. At the same time as his expectant celebrations, he warns against those who invoke false gods, those who make idols. Instead of trying making our own gods from the stuff of creation, we should wait upon the creator, the one true God who will deliver his people in his good time. The good news told by Mark is that this good time is upon us. The true deliverer, the Lord's messiah, is the one who comes after John the Baptist, the one who speaks of the kingdom, the one

who baptises not with water but with the Holy Spirit. But that, like him is to come. For now, we must stand and wait, watching as we keep our advent vigil for this one who will follow, knowing that it is our task, yours and mine, to “prepare the way of the Lord”.