

St Andrew's Chesterton

Isaiah 11.10-12.6, 16 December 2018

You have to hand it to the ancient Assyrians – they were honest. Their artistic propaganda relishes every detail of torture, massacre, battlefield executions and human displacement that made Assyria the dominant power of the Middle East from about 900 to 612BC. Assyrian art contains some of the most appalling images ever created. In one scene, tongues are being ripped from the mouths of prisoners. That will mute their screams when, in the next stage of their torture, they are flayed alive. In another relief a surrendering general is about to be beheaded and in a third prisoners have to grind their fathers' bones before being executed in the streets of Nineveh.

These and many more episodes of calculated cruelty can be seen carved in gypsum in the British Museum's blockbuster recreation of Assyria's might. Assyrian art makes up in tough energy what it lacks in human tenderness. It is an art of war – all muscle, movement, impact. People and animals are portrayed as fierce cartoons of merciless force.

The Guardian's review of 'I am Ashurbanipal', the British Museum exhibition named after the ruler of the Assyrian empire from 668 to about 627BC, the generation after the first prophet Isaiah. There could not be a greater contrast with Isaiah 11, the second half of which we heard this morning. For the first half you'll have to wait until the carol service – you see, there's no end to this series of sermons on Isaiah... He just comes back again and again.

And I make no apology because Isaiah in the end is an evangelist, a teller of the good news. Oh yes, he's a bit John the Baptist – he has lots of bad news, lots of words of judgment, lots of calls to repent, to think again, for Israel to turn away from its faithless and wicked ways to truly embrace its calling to be people of God, worshipping the God who mysteriously and wondrously made known in its history, the God who called them into loving relationship and called them to live that out in a society of compassion, justice and righteousness – but a God whose teaching was so often spurned and whose ways were so often forsaken as Israel sought to imitate the kinds of society which surrounded it – such as found in cruel Assyria.

Israel's rulers had too often been imitators of the Ashurnabipals and Sennacheribs of the ancient world in defiance of the prophets such as Micah, Hosea, Amos and Isaiah who urged their people to be distinctive in their character and faithful to their God.

Our friend Isaiah longed for a king who would exemplify the true calling of Israel, a shoot from the stump of Jesse – Jesse of course was the father of David. As far as Isaiah was concerned all had gone downhill since the glorious time of David, each successor worse than the one before. Isaiah's Jesse tree was one fit for chopping. He longed to hack it all down, to go back to the roots:

A shoot shall come out of the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. The spirit of the Lord shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding... with righteousness he shall judge for the poor... faithfulness shall be the belt around his loins... The wolf shall lie down with the lamb, the lion shall eat straw like the ox... they will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord as the waters cover the sea.

I think Isaiah saw a taster of that kingship in the reign of Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, whom he said would be called Emmanuel. The story of Hezekiah is quite remarkable. You can read about him partly in 2

Kings 18 and 19 and partly in the archaeological textbooks. Next summer I am going to be taking three months of study leave and that will begin with a trip to Jerusalem. One of the things I've been longing to see is Hezekiah's tunnel – a marvel of engineering that diverts water from the spring of Gihon that emerges at the entrance of the temple into the pool of Siloam, thus insuring that Jerusalem had a permanent water supply that meant it could endure and survive through a period of siege. Hezekiah was a religious reformer – he followed much of what Isaiah and the other prophets had been saying for decades; he removed the altars and idols of other gods, he renewed the nation's commitment to the covenant and to faithful following of the Law of Moses, and he through his engineering and military acumen ensured that Jerusalem was the only place in the whole of the middle east region from the river Tigris to the river Nile, and beyond, that was not taken over by the Assyrians. The land of Judah was devastated, its inhabitants exiled to the widest bounds of the empire and beyond – to Assyria, Egypt, even Ethiopia. And yet Jerusalem stood firm and survived. Miraculously the troops of Sennacherib in the end withdrew and the city and its land saved.

Hezekiah was indeed a righteous king and his faithfulness was rewarded but it was still the case that the country he ruled was a shadow of its former self and many of its people were scattered to the four winds. Hence Isaiah gets even more radical in his prophecy – literally radical, to the root. He looks not just to the shoot from the stump of Jesse but back to its root, digging as it were deeper down.

On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

There will be another day, says he ageing Isaiah, when a king will arise who is somehow earlier, prior to, senior to, even Jesse. And in that day the nations will be drawn to him and where he lives will be glorious. I'm not sure Isaiah had in mind the glory of the crib or the glory, as St John calls it, of the cross. I'm not sure either that he thought the nations would be coming in order to be equal citizens in the new kingdom that this king would usher in. As always with Isaiah's prophecies they are fulfilled in some very unexpected ways. But it is undoubtedly the case that those who first came to follow Jesus lived in an age when they expected Isaiah's prophecy of this chapter to be fulfilled. When they were sent out by Jesus to Judea, Samaria and the ends of the earth, they thought they were fulfilling this prophecy.

He will raise a signal for the nations, and will assemble the outcasts of Israel and gather the dispersed of Judah from the four corners of the earth.

A gathering in – that's what they were doing. The words that Kathryn will use at the altar when the bread and wine have been presented are based on a very early prayer of the church, perhaps the earliest we have a record of outside the New Testament.

*As this bread was scattered
and then gathered and made one,
so may your Church be gathered into your Kingdom.*

You and I are part of this gathering in, we are the fulfilment of Isaiah's vision. For Isaiah his hope was for a reuniting of the kingdom:

The jealousy of Ephraim shall depart, the hostility of Judah shall be cut off; Ephraim shall not be jealous of Judah, and Judah shall not be hostile towards Ephraim.

For centuries Israel had been divided into two kingdoms. Isaiah dreamed of a United Kingdom. But God's purposes were greater still – that kingdom would unite not just 12 tribes but tribes from every part of the earth would be drawn to be citizens of the king to come.

Now this is a point of course where all this ancient history touches ours, for we live in a United Kingdom, do we not? And our whole nation is wrestling with whether and how we should continue to be part of a United Europe. It would be too simplistic to draw direct parallels and to give right political answers from the pulpit. That is a temptation I have always resisted. But what I would say is this. The whole vision and trajectory of our Scriptures is towards a gathering together even of types that it seems dangerous or foolish to bring together. The wolf shall live with the lamb – and it will do so because it has determined not to attack it, maim it or eat it, but to be friends with it. I have a fear not just for our relations with our brothers and sisters in Europe but also for civil relations in our own country. The Brexit debate has brought more mutual distrust, more incivility and disdain, more deafness to the concerns of others possibly than I can remember in my lifetime. It is not good. It may be a failure of political leadership, though I do wonder whether any successful political leadership is possible at the moment. We live in dangerous times – not perhaps as dangerous as in the time of Hezekiah and Isaiah when they were surrounded by the world's largest army, but dangerous times nonetheless. Let us pray for our leaders and pray that they may, as Hezekiah did, have just a foretaste of the qualities of Isaiah's visionary king. Those of Christian faith, of course, have the template – we have seen the glory of the king reigning in the crib and on the cross. We have seen what true leadership is, what true greatness is. Christmas is a time when people turn their minds to this again, to him again. Let's pray that minds are moved to seek and follow his way once more.