

Advent 2, 9.12.07
St Andrew's, Chesterton
Isaiah 11.1-10, Romans 15.4-13

'The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope.' Romans 15.13

Someone once said, and I think it was me, that there are 'lies, damned lies and bible translations'. That's a problem that not only we have but that they have in the Bible itself. For Paul is not quoting straight out of the original Hebrew tongue here but from a Greek translation known as the Septuagint. You can see the difference for yourself – compare v13 with Isaiah 11.10.

Timothy Radcliffe, a distinguished Dominican writer, has this to say about one modern translation:

"The Good News Bible promised a translation that was 'clear, simple, and unambiguous'.⁵ That was a misguided promise, because the beauty and power of the Bible is precisely that it is not clear, simple and unambiguous. Its language is suggestive, allusive, puzzling – resembling a conversation with someone who is always leading one on to a disclosure that promises to make sense of everything."

Earlier in the same article he said this:

"Most people, when they begin to read the Bible, expect to learn facts. Fundamentalist Christians read Genesis to learn facts about the creation of the world. And even if one grows beyond a literal interpretation of the Bible, one may still hope for facts about God. But the Bible is not primarily *about* God. Rather it is entering into conversation with God. What matters is not so much the accuracy of the text as the fidelity of the speaker, who transforms us by engaging us in conversation. Gabriel Josipovici says, 'We have to trust the book itself and see where it will take us . . . The Bible guides us if we will only let it, towards the answers it contains but can only show, not tell.'⁴ One surrenders to the narrative, and it carries us onwards, towards a revelation that is always somehow in the future, yet to be fully given."

I like that, not only because it sounds good – and not only because it means that we don't need to worry too much about the precise translation of individual verses – but primarily because it supports what the Bible says itself. Look at Romans 4.4:

'Whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction...'

What for? As a theological text-book so that we believe the right things? As a source of ethical norms so that we know what's right and what's wrong? No..

'...so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the Scriptures we might have hope.'

The Scriptures point us forwards. They do not allow us to cling to the present, where we can either be too much at sea because of all the storms around us or we can be too

confident in our own grasp of the truth; they point us forwards to a completion in the future – ‘we see now only in part, as in a mirror dimly, but then face to face’. The Scriptures do not allow us to remain static; they are like the London Eye, which never stops for people to get on or off, but you must board it as it is moving and it will take you onwards to see the view. As Radcliffe put it, ‘one surrenders to the narrative, and it carries us onwards, towards a revelation that is always somehow in the future, yet to be fully given’.

That was the prophetic vision in the Old Testament, supremely demonstrated in the book of the prophet Isaiah. Isaiah summed up in two words preached both JUDGEMENT and HOPE. He railed against human wickedness and injustice, corrupt judges and faithless rulers, empty worship and heartless religion, the exploitation and oppression of the poor and marginalized. But to the faithful few he gave hope – of a better future, of a new order, of the rediscovery of the lost Paradise under the government of a new king in a new world order. Isaiah lived in the second half of the 8th century BC; he presumably died then too but his impact was so massive and his legacy so great that his ministry and his writings continued to grow. Timothy Radcliffe again gives a marvellous illustration of this by reference to Mrs Beeton, the Delia Smith of the Victorian era. Her writings continued to develop and expand in the twentieth century even though she died in 1865! Her books on household management and cookery went through endless editions and revisions. I found on the web ‘The best of Mrs Beeton’s Easy Everyday Cooking’ – and in the blurb:

‘Our Mrs Beeton’s - Easy Everyday Cooking includes the 200 best recipes including many soups, fish, poultry, meat and vegetable dishes, fully updated (even including microwave tips) as well as sections on sauces, dressing etc.’

She has never gone out of print. Indeed there seems to be a resurgence of interest in Mrs Beeton in our own day. That includes the production of modern editions of her original work – and the reader comments on Amazon are interesting: while they say ‘don’t try her recipes for home medicines’, understandably, many found her original recipes a revelation and the personality that shines through is far from the stern Victorian matron one might expect.

Similarly Isaiah was both rediscovered in later centuries but also adapted and his writings expanded. Chapters 40-55 date from an era 150-200 years later when the original Isaiah’s message of hope like the London Eye, as it were, picked up a new generation, one that had at last taken to heart the message of judgement and indeed had paid very dearly for their own sins and those of their fathers. The prophet’s words give shape to a new beginning for Israel, from captivity in Babylon to the rebuilding of Jerusalem, the Temple and the Jewish nation and religion.

Fast forward another five centuries and the writers of the New Testament rediscover Isaiah again, both in his original form and in his expanded editions. They have been swept along by another carriage of salvation history. The old dream of a King, like David and the glorious kings of old, rising up and beginning a new order, that dream had become a waking reality. John the Baptist preached judgment but the king who had finally come added the all-important dimension of hope. Judgement and hope, Isaiah’s message renewed.

Fast forward another 20 centuries. I read recently a moving account of a journalist and lecturer visiting the genocide memorials in Rwanda; many of these are in derelict churches. One he walked into and saw

'ordinary metal shelves, reminiscent of those you might find at B&Q. On these shelves, neatly organised in rows were skulls... One still had a metal rod protruding from its forehead...'

The story was that 5000 Tutsis had taken refuge in the church. Many of their Hutu neighbours, supported by gangs, came upon them. Tools intended for the farm – machetes, hoes and clubs – were used against the Tutsis, one of them still embedded in a skull. Others were shot and then grenades and tear gas were thrown into the church. Everyone was killed.

I was struck by the reversal of Isaiah's prophecy – this was not swords into ploughshares, but ploughshares into swords.

You have probably seen similar stories in the news over the past 13 years as those dreadful events have been reviewed. You may not be aware of the quiet painstaking work that is being done in that country to rebuild. The article tells the story of an Rwandan Anglican priest, who was training in Britain at the time of the genocide, but who returned soon after.

'He was initially pressed to take senior leadership roles in the local church, but he turned these down in order to set up a series of intensive workshops on reconciliation. Through an organisation now called REACH he targets leaders, women and children. He encourages them to think through the complex causes of the genocide. While some blame colonial powers or Western apathy, others point to economic oppression, ecclesial corruption and even environmental degradation. Through these workshops they move on beyond the 'blame game' to understanding that many factors contributed to the genocide. They face the failure of Church, their own experiences, and their own involvement. These workshops take place over several months and help participants to discover the need for personal change and national transformation. Along with a team of leaders, Kalisa encourages each member of the workshops to reflect on how Jesus shakes us from our current world views and calls us each to ministries of reconciliation.'

These meetings bring together unlikely people. For instance, a widow who lost her partner through the genocide finds herself looking after a woman whose husband is in prison for his role in the genocide. Through meeting, talking and listening, they have become friends. Her husband, one of thousands of killers living in Rwanda today, was recently released, after over 12 years in prison. He was shaken to discover whom his wife had befriended. Coming out of prison he expected to encounter a desire for violent revenge directed against him. Instead, through the unlikely friend-ship of these two women, he met an openness to his asking for forgiveness.'

That priest is doing what Desmond Tutu did with the Truth and Reconciliation Commission in South Africa, picking up the message and ministry of Isaiah. Judgement and Hope. Not avoiding the truth, but facing it painstakingly and radically, so that Hope, reconciliation may flow. That is the shape a truly prophetic ministry in our own day needs to take. Judgement

and Hope. It always has been the shape of true prophecy, from the time of Isaiah, our Lord
aside perhaps the greatest of all the prophets.