

## **Sermon for Chesterton, 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday after Trinity (Isaiah 59.10-20 and Mark 10.46-52)**

The 59<sup>th</sup> chapter of the Book of Isaiah makes pretty bleak reading at first sight. But to understand why that is so we need to remember the context in which it was written. There are of course probably three books falling under the single name of Isaiah. The third one, from which this passage comes, reflects the time after Israel had returned from exile in Babylon. That return had been awaited with earnest expectation and marked by joy and jubilation when it came. After the destruction of the holy city Jerusalem, after having been carried away into bondage in the east, at long last the People of God had been permitted to come home. They were to build a new society and enter a golden age, at peace with God and at home one with one another.

But as so often happens, the anticipation far exceeded the event. That is why the excerpt we have just heard begins in such a bleak way. The prophet bemoans the disappointing new society that has been created. It is a far from encouraging sight. The peoples' hands are defiled with blood for their lips speak lies and their mouths utter wickedness. The law is hijacked and used for unjust purposes. The blood of the innocent is shed and the way of justice and peace is not followed.

There is nothing new about this in human experience. After traumatic events and the longed for homecoming, it is not usually too long before bitter disillusionment begins. In the modern era for example, following the excitement of Armistice Day in 1918, once the new world order had settled in, it soon looked depressingly like the old one it had replaced. It certainly had as much blood and suffering.

And after the troops returned from World War II it was only a short matter of time before the threat of nuclear destruction loomed and local conflicts made the triumph of peace look hollow. Great expectations are all very well but experience teaches that as the Bible puts it, there is nothing new under the sun – especially the inhuman capacity to inflict cruelty and suffering on others. It is small wonder then that Isaiah was disillusioned as a new society supposedly grounded in justice and peace manifestly failed to emerge.

In verse 9, he begins with a terrible complaint:

“...justice is far from us and righteousness does not reach us; we wait for light and lo! - there is darkness; and for brightness, but we walk in gloom.”

It is a lament as terrible as anything in the psalms. The people grope in darkness like a blind man feeling his way along a wall. Because of their sins they have lost the light. God has apparently abandoned them, giving them over to their fate. Moral degeneration inevitably follows. Lying words

conceived in the heart are uttered to the detriment of others and we are told, “Truth stumbles in the public square.”

Those words have a remarkably contemporary ring as we in our day struggle with the growing phenomenon of “fake news.” Widespread disillusionment with public institutions and the apparent ease with which world leaders manipulate reality means that amongst us, truth is not only stumbling in the public square but sometimes prostrate on the pavement! Isaiah would surely have agreed with St Paul when centuries later he wrote bluntly to the Corinthians:

“The human race has nothing to boast about to God.”

But as so often in Isaiah, the story does not end there. The Lord does not despise the prayer of his people nor leave them alone in their distress. The Jewish people knew that they must never abandon hope. So the prophet foretells a great future day when God will intervene to rectify the situation and bring about justice on the earth.

Like a mighty warrior it says, he is able descend from above. Buckling on his shield and armour – signs of his righteousness and power to save – he enters the fray himself, dealing vengeance to his enemies and to those who oppress the community, repaying them for their misdeeds. Verses 19 and 20 speak of the appearing of the Lord’s “name” and of his “glory,” which are to be feared.

For the Jewish people the “name” and the “glory” signify God’s very presence, his own self. The glory, meaning his refulgent majesty, breaks out like the light - illuminating the terrible darkness that prevailed at the start of this reading. Like a pent-up stream driven by the wind it says, the Lord will burst his banks and inundate his people: he will appear as Redeemer and Saviour.

It is not difficult for Christians in this passage to catch a glimpse, as in so many others in Isaiah, of Jesus Christ. John the Baptist’s father Zechariah, when he celebrated the birth of his own son, testified in similar terms to the one who was to come:

“The dawn from on high will break upon us,  
to give light to those who sit in darkness  
and in the shadow of death  
and to guide our feet into the way of peace.”

And again, in John’s Gospel we read about Jesus: “He let his glory be seen and his disciples believed in him.”

Referring to Christ is apposite here because the Book of Isaiah has traditionally been called “the 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel.” That name has been attached to it because so many of its prophecies set forth, often in astonishing detail, the one who was to come, the one whom we acclaim as Lord and Messiah

- Jesus of Nazareth, who was put to death for our sins and raised for our salvation.

But true as it is, Christians need to be careful with how they understand and employ this notion of “the 5<sup>th</sup> Gospel.”

Before the Book of Isaiah is a testimony to Jesus Christ, it is what it is *primarily*: a holy book of the Jews. Jewish scripture is addressed first to the Jewish people. We Christians should not simply hijack their Scriptures and press them into service for our own purposes. In the light of Christ, we have indeed been granted by grace a new insight into the holy books.

Through the coming of Christ we can perceive deeper meanings that lie hidden, concealed from those who do not have faith in him.

But that does not signify that their original Jewish meaning is now irrelevant. As Christians we receive not only the New Testament but the books of what we call the Old Testament, as the written Word of God. The Jewish Scriptures have not simply been taken over by us as if their Jewish meaning can just disappear. They record God’s dealings with his beloved people Israel in the past and that is valid for ever – just as the Jews remain God’s people for ever. We Christians are latecomers, a wild branch grafted on to the tree of God’s people. We do not simply supplant or replace the Jews but through us the living God whom they love and worship is made know beyond Israel. As St Paul put it, through Jesus

Christ, the blessings given to Abraham are extended to the Gentiles.

And yet, as Christians, we know that God's name and God's glory – his very presence - *have* been made known to us in a unique way. That name is Jesus Christ and that glory is his death and resurrection. He is the light of the world that descended into our darkness and brings us healing. When he came he fulfilled and brought to completion what the Jews had always known about God.

When today therefore we hear in the Gospel about the healing of a blind man called Bartimaeus, it is a good reminder that in Jesus we are dealing with the God of Israel and not some other God. Yet when God finally came to us in Jesus, he came not as an angry warrior nor as a vengeful judge, but as loving-kindness itself bringing light to the blind and healing to the sick.

We began today with a bleak situation, with sightless Israel feeling its way along a wall. In the Gospel we meet the only one who can heal us all of our spiritual blindness and bring us light. That is why Jesus is the fulfilment of Isaiah's prophecies; but it is fulfilment, not just replacement. Let us give thanks then not only for Isaiah but for God's first chosen people, the first ones to hear and heed his word. For without the testimony of Israel we would never have been prepared to receive Our Lord Jesus Christ – "the True Light that enlightens all who come into this world."

