

PRAYERS AND BIBLE REFLECTION, SUNDAY 6 DECEMBER 2020

No 38

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1 **Being ready for worship**

Today is the second Sunday of Advent. We progress in our Advent journey of waiting. The baubles of the world's Christmas celebrations may distract us, and perhaps we're alarmed by the fact that there are now only eighteen shopping days until Christmas! Of course most of us do enjoy the celebration of Christmas with family and friends, yet as Christians we look past all of that. Our longing is not for gifts and gatherings, food and festivities, but for the coming of the Christ. We long for the miracle of the coming of the Saviour to be upon us once again.

2 **Prayer of Adoration**

Our passage for reflection today from Isaiah 40 is well known. It is followed by another only slightly less well known passage, which is a splendid prayer of praise for the Lord our God. Isaiah 40 has been the inspiration literally of hundreds of hymns and pieces of sacred music, but this week, we will let the passage stand on its own. It just resonates with the extraordinary greatness of God. Pray these words with the open-mouthed wonder with which they are composed.

Who has measured the waters in the hollow of his hand
and marked off the heavens with a span,
enclosed the dust of the earth in a measure,
and weighed the mountains in scales
and the hills in a balance?
Who has directed the spirit of the LORD,
or as his counsellor has instructed him?
Whom did he consult for his enlightenment,
and who taught him the path of justice?
Who taught him knowledge,
and showed him the way of understanding?
Even the nations are like a drop from a bucket,
and are accounted as dust on the scales;
see, he takes up the isles like fine dust.
Lebanon would not provide fuel enough,
nor are its animals enough for a burnt offering.
All the nations are as nothing before him;
they are accounted by him as less than nothing and emptiness.
To whom then will you liken God,
or what likeness compare with him?
An idol? —A workman casts it,
and a goldsmith overlays it with gold,
and casts for it silver chains.
As a gift one chooses mulberry wood
—wood that will not rot—
then seeks out a skilled artisan
to set up an image that will not topple.
Have you not known? Have you not heard?
Has it not been told you from the beginning?
Have you not understood from the foundations of the earth?
It is he who sits above the circle of the earth,
and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers;

who stretches out the heavens like a curtain,
and spreads them like a tent to live in;
who brings princes to naught,
and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing.
Scarcely are they planted, scarcely sown,
scarcely has their stem taken root in the earth,
when he blows upon them, and they wither,
and the tempest carries them off like stubble.
To whom then will you compare me,
or who is my equal? says the Holy One.
Lift up your eyes on high and see:
Who created these?
He who brings out their host and numbers them,
calling them all by name;
because he is great in strength,
mighty in power,
not one is missing.

Isaiah 40:12-26

Amen

3 **Prayer of Confession**

You may find this prayer helpful, or choose to pray your own more personal prayer, or to pray a combination of each. God is always ready to hear our confession.

Jesus Christ, our Lord,
We are so unlike you.
Although we are made in your image,
our nature is not like yours.
Your generosity and kindness are met by our selfishness;
your wisdom is met by our scepticism and doubt;
your grace is met by our ingratitude.
We try to contain you, even to control you,
to accord with our unworthy expectations of you,
and yet when you show that you are not the person we demand you be,
that you will not be governed by our agendas and requirements,
we presume the right to be disappointed in you, and even to doubt you.
Forgive us, we pray,
for we continue to pursue our life of sin, driven by our own interests.
Our love is conditional,
our forgiveness is begrudging,
our resolutions are ephemeral and unreliable.
Have mercy on us,
for in our honest moments,
we are confronted by just who and what we are,
and we are deeply sorry.
In the name of Jesus, who died for us, we pray.
Amen.

4 **Assurance of Forgiveness**

One of those whose wisdom found its way into Proverbs proclaimed this truth about the merciful God:

No one who conceals transgressions will prosper,
but one who confesses and forsakes them will obtain mercy. (Proverbs 28:13)

*This is the mercy which was incarnate in the Lord Jesus Christ,
and it is in Christ that our sins are forgiven*

5 **Selected Lectionary Reading**

Isaiah 40:1-11

The other Lectionary Readings

Psalm 85:1-2, 8-13

II Peter 3:8-15a

Mark 1:1-8

6 **Bible Reflection –**

See below

7 **Prayers for the world and Lord’s Prayer**

We are in a very fortunate position in Australia with respect to Covid-19. At time of writing (24 November), interstate borders have been reopened or are about to, because we literally have no community transmission of the virus across the nation. Being an island, having an advanced economy and sane, sensible politicians, and benefiting from a citizenry who, while far from subservient, nevertheless know when it’s time to do as the experts tell you, have borne great fruit here. We are all beginning to return to something that approaches a cautious “normal”, although some things, such as overseas travel, remain over a distant horizon. However for much of the rest of the world it is a very different story. In the United States, Brazil and Peru the virus is completely out of control, in other nations it is surging dangerously, and in many nations especially in Europe, second waves are taking another terrible toll. Three promising vaccines are on the horizon, which is good news. In any case, though, our very fortunate situation in Australia should not blind us to the need to continue praying for deliverance from this microscopic enemy.

God our Father,

We continue to pray for deliverance from the pandemic we have named Covid-19.

We give you thanks that the situation is so well controlled in Australia,

that life is edging gingerly back towards a new normal,

and we can look forward to Christmas celebrations with family and friends.

We give thanks that our leaders have acted wisely,

that our nation could muster the resources to provide relief,

and that our people have responded sensibly to the necessities demanded for public safety.

We pray that these blessings will continue until the pandemic passes,

that we shall not let our guard down, or become blasé about our situation,

or succumb to the yearning that makes us want to think that all danger has passed.

Most of all, Father, we give thanks for the lives that have been saved by prudent action,

for we see in so many other nations the terrible cost this disease can bring.

So we turn our attention to the rest of the world,

and pray for the deliverance of all nations from the threat of the contagion.

We pray for the nations where, for whatever reasons, the disease is simply out of control,

and we pray for those where seeming control has evaporated in the face of a second wave.

We pray for safety for all people, but particularly for the very vulnerable –

the elderly and the sick, but also the health workers
whose constant exposure to the virus makes them particularly prone to the disease.
We pray for governments which must make difficult decisions,
hard enough where national resources give real choices,
but impossibly difficult when the nation is poor and lacks the capacity to protect its citizenry.
We pray for scientists developing vaccines,
that their work will be successful, and their products effective.
Particularly, we pray that vaccines will be made equitably available
to the neediest people of all nations,
irrespective of their nations' or the individuals' ability to pay for them.
Finally, Father, we pray for those whose livelihoods have suffered during this pandemic.
We pray for those who have lost their jobs, or had their hours reduced;
for businesses which have lost their viability, and teeter on the edge of bankruptcy,
or have already had to close, throwing more people out of work,
and often destroying the life's work of their proprietors.
We pray particularly for the travel and tourism industries,
whose downturn continues and which will take many months, if not years, to recover
We pray for economic recovery, not so we can return to profligate affluence,
but because those who have suffered most in these times have been the poor.
As we approach the new year, Father we pray for a better year,
a year in which the pandemic passes,
and its devastating trail of destruction is finally put behind us.

We conclude our prayer with the prayer that Jesus taught us to say:

Our father in heaven,
Hallowed be your name.
Your kingdom come;
Your will be done
on earth as in heaven.
Give us today our daily bread,
and forgive us our sins
as we forgive those who sin against us.
Save us from the time of trial
and deliver us from evil,
for the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours,
now and forever.
Amen

8 **Conclusion**

As you conclude, resolve to continue your patient Advent waiting.
Know that the promises of God are sure,
and that the power of God is the love of God.
What will come upon us when Christmas comes
is a love so overwhelming that it is the greatest power in all the creation.
As you wait, know that that love is already with you.
We proclaim that this is so in the Grace:
*The grace of our Lord Jesus Christ,
the love of God,
and the fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with you, evermore.*
Amen.

BIBLE REFLECTION
PREPARE THE WAY OF THE LORD

Each Christmas and Easter, I make it a point to listen to Handel's *Messiah*. It is such a magnificent oratorio, and the more familiar one becomes with it, the better one loves it. Immediately following the Overture there is a piece which is based on our passage from Isaiah 40. It announces the coming of the Messiah.

Some of you may also recall a very different piece of music. In 1971, *Godspell* opened in New York, presenting the gospel of Matthew as a musical. It came to Australia soon after. Surely the best song from *Godspell* is "Prepare Ye the Way of the Lord", in which the seven words of the title are sung over and over again. This refrain of course comes directly from Isaiah 40:3 and, like the piece from *The Messiah*, it forms a prelude to the coming of Jesus Christ.

Both pieces of music reflect the interpretation given to this passage from Isaiah by the three synoptic gospels. Mark, Matthew and Luke all declare that Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled by John the baptiser, the prophet in the wilderness of Judaea who called on the people to repent because the One who "will baptise you with the Holy Spirit" was coming soon.¹ While no one would deny the truth of this understanding, we should not limit ourselves just to it; the passage from Isaiah 40 is far richer and far more evocative than this single view would suggest.

Chapter 40 commences the section of Isaiah we called "Second Isaiah"² and dates from the middle of the 6th century BC, one hundred and fifty years after First Isaiah had written. This was a time when the captivity of the Jews in Babylon was drawing towards its conclusion with the unstoppable rise of King Cyrus, who would eventually decree their release. The Jews believed that the defeat of Judaea, the sacking of Jerusalem, the destruction of the Temple, and their captivity in Babylon had been God's punishment for their sins. After all, the prophet Hosea had represented God as declaring, "... you are not my people and I am not your God"³; while Ezekiel, at least according to one interpretation, had pictured the glory of God departing from Jerusalem⁴ The first poem of the five collected together as Lamentation, all bewailing the shock and tragedy of the fall of Jerusalem, has a refrain referring to the vanquished city: "there is none to comfort her."⁵

To the repentant people of Judah, Second Isaiah sounds forth a message of hope. Almost as if it were a direct reply to that desperate refrain from Lamentation 1, the prophet declares,

*Comfort, O comfort my people,
says your God.
Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,
and cry to her
that she has served her term,
that her penalty is paid,
that she has received from the LORD's hand
double for all her sins.*

The time of punishment is over. Judah has paid doubly for her sins. Now her people can be comforted. And, proclaims an unidentified voice, God himself is coming in all his power and majesty to sweep through the desert and to reveal himself to his people.

¹ Mark 1:2-8; Matthew 3:1-12; Luke 3:2-17.; cf John 1:23.

² Isaiah 40-55.

³ Hosea 1:9.

⁴ Ezekiel 11:22-25

⁵ Lamentation 1:2, 9, 17, 21.

A voice cries out:

*“In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
Every valley shall be lifted up,
and every mountain and hill be made low;
the uneven ground shall become level,
and the rough places a plain.
Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,
and all people shall see it together,
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken.”*

This is a powerful metaphor which bespeaks the power of the creator God. Not only will he show himself in all his glory, but the very earth will anticipate his presence, as valleys, mountains and rough terrain all smooth out their roughness and difficulties and form into a majestic highway that sweeps through the desert wilderness towards Jerusalem. We might picture a modern freeway, but such constructions were completely unknown in the biblical world, and did not begin to appear anywhere in the world until the mid-20th century. The potency of the image is very dramatic.

All this will happen “for the mouth of the LORD has spoken”, just as God spoke the creation into being in the Genesis account⁶. Indeed, our passage then contrasts the mighty word of the LORD with the frailty of human life.

*All people are grass,
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
The grass withers, the flower fades,
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;
surely the people are grass.
The grass withers, the flower fades;
but the word of our God will stand forever.*

Whereas the life of human beings is ephemeral, inevitably succumbing to decline and demise, all that God speaks is timeless. The relevance to our passage of this declaration is clear. The captivity in Babylon may seem, to the Jews, to have gone on endlessly, but in fact it has lasted but several generations. In the scheme of things, it is nothing. Generations are born and pass away. However God is eternal; God’s word, which is the foundation of all things, “will stand forever”. God’s pronouncements will be forever true. God is completely outside our short-lived frame of reference. And what God promises for the future of his people utterly outweighs the suffering they have endured, because it will be for all time. So we come to the proclamation, which is put into the mouth of a personified Zion and Jerusalem.

*Get you up to a high mountain,
O Zion, herald of good tidings;
lift up your voice with strength,
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,
lift it up, do not fear;
say to the cities of Judah,
“Here is your God!”
See, the Lord GOD comes with might,
and his arm rules for him;
his reward is with him,
and his recompense before him.*

⁶ Genesis 1:3, 6, 9, 11, 14, 24, 26.

The image is, once again, of the might of God. Not only is God coming in all his power and glory, but he is bringing two gifts for his people – “reward” and “recompense”. Not only are the people forgiven, but they are to be compensated in some way for their double suffering; they are even in some way to be rewarded. No wonder the passage began with words of comfort!

Then comes perhaps the most remarkable image of the passage. The emphasis has been on the extraordinary power of God, which causes the very creation to form up for his passage, which is full of God’s majesty and grandeur, and which is eternal. Yet what are the reward and the recompense which God is bringing with him? It is not a mighty act in the sense that his people might hope for. God makes no promise to vanquish their enemies, to grant them a mighty kingdom, to rebuild the glories of Jerusalem, or even to afford them prosperity in their homeland. God’s promise is quite different. It is gentle, loving and caring.

*He will feed his flock like a shepherd;
he will gather the lambs in his arms,
and carry them in his bosom,
and gently lead the mother sheep.*

God will fulfil the role of the good shepherd to his people. He will care for them, nurture them and love them. The juxtaposition of the two images, one, the mighty creator God, the other, the caring, gentle shepherd to his flock, could not be starker. It is a dramatic revelation of God’s character. The most powerful aspect of God’s character is love. The defining characteristic of this giant is his gentleness.

Truly this inspirational passage was a proclamation of good news, of tenderness and comfort, to the dispirited exiles in Babylon, who had fretted that their God had deserted them forever. This was the context in which Second Isaiah wrote, and the freeing of the captives, and their return to Jerusalem, were to demonstrate to them that God had indeed acted with compassion and love.

It is thus more than interesting that the gospel writers associated the voice crying out in the wilderness with John the Baptist, and with John’s message of the imminent coming of Jesus Christ. It is sometimes alleged that the divinity of Jesus was a late accretion to the beliefs of the early Church. There are many reasons why this is demonstrably untrue, but one is that the gospel writers, from the earliest of them, Mark, clearly applied this passage from Isaiah, portending the coming of the creator God, to the coming of Jesus. If Jesus was seen as fulfilling this prophecy, then Jesus was very evidently being identified as God. Nothing could be clearer.

But that is just an historical aside. As Christians, we do not need to be convinced of the divinity of Christ. At times, however, we do need a reminder about the character of Jesus and the character of God. As did the Jews of Jesus’ own day. Their expectation of the long-awaited messiah was that he would be a mighty warrior, a king in the sense that the world understood kingship. In John’s gospel, after the feeding of the five thousand, Jesus fled into the mountains, to prevent the crowd trying to make him king⁷. Jesus clearly eschewed any such role. That was *not* the character of the messiah, and it represented a misunderstanding of the ancient prophecies which pointed to the coming king. Those ancient prophecies included our passage today.

We find it very difficult to reconcile our worldly view of power and might with God’s understanding of true power and true might. Like the Jews, when we think about power, we conjure up images of great armies, potent weapons, irresistible force. Most of us, whether we admit it or not, subscribe to Mao’s dictum that power comes out of the barrel of a gun. Even if we accept the very different character Jesus embodied during his earthly ministry, we may still find ourselves

⁷ John 6:15.

picturing his future return as something closer to the victory parade of a great conqueror than to Jesus' humble entry into Jerusalem. If that is the case, we too need to heed what this and so many other passages teach us about true power, and about God's real character. For all that God is the omnipotent creator of all things, who could if he chose make a display of his power that would petrify us if it did not simply destroy us, God chooses to invest all of his power in his love. Rather than the role of the mighty warrior-king, God chooses that of the loving shepherd, the one who will feed his flock, carry his lambs, and lead his mother sheep. It was precisely that character which was embodied in the Lord Jesus, the one who knelt to wash his disciples' feet, who submitted to the misguided brutality of those whom he came to serve and save, and who went willingly to the cross of shame to give his very life for his sheep.

The world has yet to learn the lesson that naked power is never the solution to our deepest problems. In this second week of Advent, our reading from Isaiah tells us this very clearly. God does not act in that way. We long for the coming of the messiah, not because it will overwhelm us with its spectacular might and majesty, but because it will overwhelm us with love such as we have never known. The gospel is simply this, that

God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have eternal life. Indeed, God did not send the Son into the world to condemn the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him. (John 3:16-17)

Once again, we await the commemoration of that mighty act of love, and once again we await the return of the one in whom such extraordinary love is the true power of God.