

“Beyond The Prosperity Gospel” – Isa 55:1-9

“Ho!” In what was forever an unforgettable moment for me, a preacher some years ago walked out on stage before five thousand young Presbyterians and uttered simply that one word – “Ho!” The ensuing pause lasted a second or two, and then the entire auditorium at Purdue University erupted in a roar of laughter, which of course was the reaction he anticipated. To those young people gathered there the word “Ho” was indeed a greeting, but not particularly a biblical one, instead being used either to denigrate their female peers or to refer to a certain type of working girl. Once that huge room had settled down and he had their full attention, he went on to preach using today’s text from Isaiah ... and now I can never read this text without that moment arising vividly in my mind.

However, having gotten that opening out of the way, let’s take a more sober look at what the text from Isaiah is offering us. That the Book of Isaiah is a profoundly foundational piece of scripture for the Christian faith urges us to do so. Not only is this book a vitally important piece of the Hebrew Scriptures we receive as the Old Testament, this prophetic work heavily influenced both Jesus and the writers of the New Testament. You may recall a few weeks ago we looked at the incident with Jesus in the synagogue reading a text and declaring “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing” ... the passage that he read was also from Isaiah – 61:1-2 to be precise. Such importance accorded to a scriptural work signals that we should dig a little deeper into today’s reading from Isaiah.

To effectively begin that digging we need to recall the structure and makeup of the Book of Isaiah, primarily to understand the historical context so that we can grasp the relevance of the prophetic utterances both to the original time and to our own situations. The book itself has long been a focus of biblical scholarship. Central to that study in the past few hundred years has been the recognition that there are two – many would argue three – major parts to the book. The first thirty-nine chapters are apparently from a prophet who lived in the Eighth Century B.C., a classic prophet of the era who castigated the leaders and people of Israel alike for their unfaithfulness, scheming, and injustice and both predicted and promised that God would wreak vengeance upon them for their lack of faith and obedience. The second block which extends to the end of Chapter 55 apparently comes from the hand of a writer who lived in Israel following the return of the exiles from Babylon some 170 years later. It begins with the unforgettable “Comfort, comfort ye my people” and carries on through our reading today. The third section contains what is called the “Suffering Servant” passages, one of which Jesus quoted in the synagogue.

Many have suggested that the sections could or even should be separated, but a fascinating new perspective was offered by Brevard Childs, a professor at Yale Divinity School, who suggests that the book not only has been properly kept intact by both Jewish and Christian scriptures but was deliberately stitched together to provide a historical perspective on the shift in understanding of the relationship between God and people – specifically, to preserve the shift in perspective from a harsh and demanding God to a God of grace, mercy, and pardoning

Today’s text (“Ho!”) divides into two parts that are not only similar in both form and content but also reflect in a way the entire book. In the first five verses God addresses through the prophet’s voice the whole people of Israel with an invitation to a banquet phrased like the loud calls of street vendors. But buried in there we also hear a subtle charge that the people are living neither wisely nor well; living in ways that do not express thankfulness for their deliverance out of Babylonian captivity back into their Israeli homeland. “Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread?” tells us that the people are making poor choices; “and your labor for that which does not satisfy?” reinforces that challenge. Of course the questions are somewhat rhetorical and were meant to be taken more broadly. The issue is not bread in and of itself; the issue is that peoples’ priorities were messed up and they were wasting their resources.

That accusation is quickly followed with a second invitation, a beckoning to respond to God and to discover in return a more wholesome and fulfilling life. God supports that invitation with a reminder of what he has already delivered in the covenant with David, a covenant that has been once again fulfilled to the Israelite nation through their deliverance and return from exile by the rivers of Babylon. He expands that covenant here to all nations, with Israel as the prototype and agency through which the other nations will not only find and acquire meaningful life but will also receive abundant pardon from God.

Note especially the hugely significant transition from the first part to the second part in this reading, a powerful shift in the relationship between God and faithful believers. Can you see the movement from God declaring (as per the covenant with David) “if you do such and such I will bless you as a nation” to God now saying “I have blessed you and will continue to bless you, and this is what I expect in return.” This is a dramatic and powerful shift from early Old Testament theology of “curses and blessings”, i.e. “do right and I’ll bless you; do wrong and I’ll curse you” to a more Christian theology of “God has done this for you, and this is an appropriate response in your new life.”

This shift signals a dramatic change in how people viewed God and what they understood God wants from people. Our reading is typical, as the Book of Isaiah as a whole reflects the same shift in understanding. More importantly for us as Christians we see Jesus as having truly fulfilled the reading he selected from the same book and as a result we profess our faith in Jesus as being the ultimate reaching out by God to provide a path for forgiveness and reconciliation. How then do we or should we see the second half of this new paradigm, the part about what it is that God expects or at least wants from us?

Sadly today much of our society and even a significant part of the Christian church hasn’t made the same shift. The term “prosperity gospel” has even been coined to describe the flavour of Christian proclamation and worship that emphasises a creed that says “do good and God will smile upon you with favours such as a great job, good wealth, a harmonious family, and more material blessings than you could ever enjoy!” While most of our secular society professes to be spiritual rather than religious, I would argue that this creed forms their religious foundation.

What then lies “beyond the prosperity gospel”? This text, as well as the entire Christian faith, addresses that question – and the answer is another question, namely “how does God ask us to live given that we are already redeemed and reconciled to God in Christ?” Can you recognize the subtle but immensely powerful difference between these two views: on the one hand “do good and you will be rewarded” and “you’ve already been rewarded, now do good”?

How then do we incline our ears, and listen, that we might not only live but have the abundant life promised to us by God in Christ? We can listen to the word of God in worship and scripture; we can wait the direction from God in prayer – at least we do when we’re not too busy in prayer telling God what we think He should do. We can accept that we are not only pardoned by God but that we are lovingly accepted, and use that new-found strength and vigour to live in wholesome ways that will cause others to seek the joy and fulfillment that we have found. We can in that assurance provide assurance to others that they too are welcome to “come buy wine and milk without money and without price.” We can use the energy we gain from no longer fretting about what is unimportant to then concentrate on how we can address the things in life that really matter, our relationship with God and our relationship with other people. In this way we are freed up to discover the abundant new life offered by God in Christ, the living proof of the claim in Isaiah that “he will abundantly pardon.”