The Advent in Isaiah

The Parish of Christ Church
Windsor, Nova Scotia

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Advent 2012

The Advent in Isaiah

Part I

Isaiah is "*the most evangelical of the prophets,*" a seventeenth century Anglican Divine, Anthony Sparrow, observes. And, certainly, of all the prophets it is safe to say that *Isaiah* is, perhaps, the best known and, perhaps, even the most read of all of the Books of the Prophets, at least in the liturgies of the Church, and the one prophet, too, whose words have inspired some of the greatest music of all times. One has only to think of Handel's *Messiah* or many of the Bach cantatas.

In the Advent season particularly, readings from *The Book of the Prophet Isaiah* stand out and compel our attention. Readings from *Isaiah*, for instance, are prominent in the wonderful service of Advent Lessons and Carols. In the season of the preparation for the celebration of Christ's holy birth, images and phrases from *Isaiah* help to shape our understanding of the mystery and the wonder of the Incarnation. For that reason *The Book of Isaiah* is read at the Daily Offices of Morning and Evening Prayer and in the Sunday Offices throughout the Advent and Christmas seasons and into Epiphany. There is, it seems, a prophetic conjunction between *Isaiah* and the central themes of the Christian Gospel.

The Book of the Prophet Isaiah spans at least two centuries and while it is all collectively *The Book of Isaiah*, it is probably the work of several writers over several centuries from the latter half of the 8th century to the latter half of the 6th century BC. The scholarly consensus, more or less, is that *The Book of Isaiah* is best appreciated as three books or one book having three distinct sections: *First Isaiah*, chapters 1-39; *Deutero-Isaiah*, chapters 40-55; and, *Trito-Isaiah*, chapters 56-66. Readings from each of these three divisions of the book figure prominently in the Christian Church's understanding of the mystery of the Incarnation.

We may take four passages as examples of '*the Advent in Isaiah*': *Isaiah 11.1-9*; *Isaiah 60.1-6; Isaiah 7. 10-15;* and *Isaiah 40.1-11.* The first two will be the focus for this session; the last two at the next.

Isaiah 11. 1-9, read at the Service of Advent Lessons & Carols, opens us out to couplet of themes. There is a twofold reflection upon the *Messianic King* and the idea of *Paradise Restored*. The passage has had an enormous influence upon the theological understanding of our humanity, upon the idea of Creation as Paradise, and upon our thinking about the person of Jesus Christ.

It begins with the idea of the Messianic King associated with the line of David. "*And there shall come forth a rod out of the stem of Jesse,*" it begins, recalling us immediately to *The Book of Ruth* and to the family tree of King David, the King who united the unruly tribes of Israel in the worship of God centered in Jerusalem, Zion. Jesse is David's

father, his grandfather was Obed, the child whom Ruth, a Moabitess, bore from Boaz but who was nursed by Naomi of Bethlehem, her mother-in-law. The complexity of things within and without Israel is altogether to the point. It is worth noting, too, that Ruth is one of the four women named in Matthew's genealogy of Jesus, all of whom are non-Jewish. There is, in other words, an aspect of universality to the way in which the Messiah is envisioned and anticipated.

But this is only the beginning of considerations in Isaiah's vision, for *"the Spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him."* The Holy Spirit of God conveys the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit upon the Messiah. The gifts are spiritual principles which speak to heart and mind and which are properties or qualities of the Messiah. The Hebrew text as we have it from much later period than the Greek translation of it, called the *Septuagint*, names six gifts but the *Septuagint* itself speaks of the seven gifts of the Spirit. That has defined a whole tradition in the life of the Church Catholic.

But what are these so-called gifts, these qualities of soul that participate or share in the divine nature itself? *"The spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and of the fear of the Lord."* The *Septuagint*, probably out of sense of the rhetorical patterns of the Greek language, couples *"piety"* or devotion with knowledge and makes *"the fear of the Lord"* a kind of concluding principle. The fear of the Lord refers to honouring or worshipping God.

They are all intellectual and spiritual gifts – things which come from God – that speak to heart and mind. That is significant with respect to theological anthropology, namely, how we understand our humanity in the sight of God. An important feature of the theological understanding of our humanity is the idea of the integration of heart and mind, something which is seen, I would suggest, in the sevenfold gifts of the Spirit. That these gifts are directly associated with the Messiah opens us out to a further significance: these gifts should also be seen as ultimately deriving from the Word and the Spirit of God and as uniting us with God. In other words, these spiritual gifts are principles that come from God to us and that speak to the greater dignity and truth of our humanity as seen in the sight of God.

In the Advent reading of the Church, these gifts that speak to the spiritual qualities of the Messiah are ascribed precisely to the coming of Christ. For Israel, the idea of the Messiah admits of a number of possibilities; principally the idea of a king who will restore Israel to prominence and rule as was partly accomplished in David's reign. In the Christian understanding that political theme is inverted. The kingdom that Christ brings is not of this world but signifies a larger sense of redemption, namely, the redemption of the world and our humanity to God.

The passage proceeds to emphasize the qualities of *righteous judgment* that belong to the Messianic kingship. In a way, it anticipates the *"hungering and thirsting"* for

righteousness in the Beatitudes. It reminds us of the divine basis of all forms of social and political justice. They have to be rooted and grounded in God's righteousness, a righteousness which acts as a powerful check upon the incomplete forms of human righteousness. We forget this at our peril.

There is the wonderful paradox that the Enlightenment world, the 17th/18th century European world that in some sense impelled the projects of social and political improvements, also recognized the follies and stupidities of human presumption. Wanting to make things better does not necessarily mean that we succeed in making things better; sometimes we make them worst. The great satirical writers like Jonathan Swift and Voltaire provide a much needed cautionary note that applies in equal measure to their world and ours.

In *Isaiah 11* the theme of the righteousness of the Messianic reign carries over into the picture of *Paradise Restored*. We are given a vision of what that righteousness looks like. It is imaged in terms of the harmony of the natural world and the harmony of man and nature but ultimately as dependent upon God's harmony with his creation restored to truth and righteousness. The sequence of images is powerful and suggestive. Harmony reigns in place of nature red in tooth and claw. The wolf shall dwell with the lamb rather than eat the lamb! This passage provoked the modern prophet of Atheism, Frederick Nietzsche, to heights of rhetorical and polemical excess largely animated by his reading of Darwin's *Origin of Species*. He argues for the will to power of each and all. The wolf shall devour the lamb; not dwell with the lamb in peace and harmony. It is a different vision and one that, logically, can only lead to abuse and destruction, to darkness and despair, to a world of will without reason.

But *Isaiah* is recalling us not to the world of the Fall from Paradise but to *Paradise Restored*. It is a poetic vision that opens us out not to the wildness of nature and man but to our humanity and world as humanized by the righteousness of God, to impossibilities made possible by the grace of God. Wolf and lamb, leopard and kid (goat), calf and young lion, cow and bear, lion and ox – all live in a kind of harmony and peace, the harmony and peace of *Paradise Restored* by a sense of the rightness of God's creation. This vision of paradise has its counterpart, too, in the themes of Arcadia from pagan antiquity. But what about our humanity? "*And a little child shall lead them,*" *Isaiah* tells us, a little child shall lead the wolf and the lamb, the leopard and the kid, the cow and the bear! "*And the sucking child,*" the child as yet unweaned, "*shall play,*" unharmed, "*on the hole of the asp*" as well as "*on the cockatrice' den.*" These images are recalled at the end of Mark's Gospel as part of the testimony to the power of the new life of the Resurrection.

"*They shall not hurt nor destroy in all my holy mountain,*" Isaiah concludes, "*for the earth shall be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea.*" God makes himself known in his truth and righteousness and there is peace and harmony.

It is a marvellous collocation of images that open us out to the power of prophecy. It shows us the divine vision for our world and our humanity. In the Christian understanding of things, it shows us the meaning of Bethlehem, the very place to which the Advent brings us. For the *Messianic King* and the theme of *Paradise Restored* is the Christian meaning of the humble scene of Christ's holy birth in Bethlehem. That story and scene is enlarged by our reading of *Isaiah*.

This leads us to the next passage, a passage that also appears in the Advent and Christmas Services of Lessons and Carols. Yet, it also forms one of the Church's canticles, the scriptural songs of praise that complement the readings of Scripture at Morning and Evening Prayer. The passage is *Isaiah 60. 1-6*. It forms the Christian Church's canticle known as the *Surge, Illuminare*. It is found in *The Canadian Book of Common Prayer* (1962) on page 28.

"*Arise, shine; for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.*" This passage from *Trito-Isaiah* strikes all of the notes of Advent expectancy and anticipation. It catapults us into the mystery of the Word and Son of God as *Light*. It opens us out to the profounder ramifications and significance of Christ's holy birth. For in the birth of Christ, there is even more than *Paradise Restored* in terms of the harmony of nature, man and God. There is the further idea of the gathering together of all of the forms of our humanity. Once again there is the note of universality: "*the forces of the Gentiles shall come unto thee*" and the riches of the nations shall flow unto thee. "*And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.*"

Light. It is one of the great and grand themes of the Advent. Here it is signaled for us in *Isaiah*. The light is the light of God that breaks into the darkness of our world and day. Advent is about the Light of God coming to us, the Light which the darkness cannot comprehend, the Light which is life and grace, truth and mercy. In the Christian understanding, that Light is Christ, the Word and Son of the Father who comes as the Light of the World. It is only the darkness of our refusals that stands in the way; such is our way, not God's way.

In the great Christmas Gospel, *John 1. 1-14*, this is made explicitly clear. There is the coming of God's Word, Son and Light to our dark world and there is either our refusal or our embrace of that Word, Son and Light, the Word made flesh. "*He came unto his own and his own received him not.*" These words should make us tremble and shake. As the poet and preacher John Donne remarks, "*God will not save us without our wills but only through our wills.*" There has to be our engagement with the God who engages us.

The passage from *Isaiah* signals the exultant qualities of rejoicing that are about our embrace of the light to a people who are buried in darkness, the darkness of doubt and despair, the darkness of sin and folly, we might say. The passage suggests the coming of the Magi-Kings to Bethlehem and names two of the gifts of the Epiphany, the gifts of

gold and incense. Myrrh is not named here. It is, of course, the gift which teaches us about Christ's sacrifice; the sacrifice which is only possible through his Incarnation, through his embrace of the human reality of body and soul.

That theme of light shining in the darkness will be taken up by John, especially in the words of his prologue read on Christmas night. How can we understand those words apart from Isaiah's words, the words of the Advent in Isaiah? His words illumine so much of the Christian mystery of Christ's holy birth, the mystery of the Incarnation. He is for that reason "*the most evangelical of the prophets.*" To read Isaiah in Advent is to be aware of the Advent in Isaiah.

The Advent in Isaiah

Part II

Anthony Sparrow's observation that Isaiah is *"the most evangelical of the Prophets"* is amply demonstrated in the pageant of readings that belong to the liturgies of Advent and Christmas. It is not just that he points us to the coming of God's holy Word and Son but that he shapes our understanding of the meaning of Christ's Incarnation.

Central to that understanding is the role and place of Mary, the Virgin Mother. *"In the sixth month,"* Luke tells us, *"the angel Gabriel was sent from God unto a city of Galilee named Nazareth, to a Virgin espoused to a man whose name was Joseph, of the house of David; and the Virgin's name was Mary."* The story of the Annunciation is inseparable from the Advent and is read during the Advent Ember Days (BCP, p. 101).

Luke's account of the Annunciation prefaces his narrative of Christ's birth. It complements Matthew's infancy narrative about how the *"birth of Jesus Christ was on this wise,"* noting that Mary was found with child of the Holy Ghost *"before [she and Joseph] came together,"* and concluding parenthetically that "*all this was done, that it might be fulfilled which was spoken of the Lord by the prophet, saying, Behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a Son, and they shall call his name Emmanuel, which being interpreted is, God with us."* Matthew is quoting *Isaiah 7. 14* from the Greek Septuagint directly, adding only the interpretation of the name, *"Emmanuel"*. Luke, too, is echoing Isaiah, changing only that his name shall be called Jesus. In the Christian understanding, Jesus is Emmanuel.

The King James' translation of *Matthew 1. 23*, where Matthew quotes from Isaiah, varies a little from that of *Isaiah 7.14* and in interesting and instructive ways. The King James translation of *Isaiah 7.14* is *"behold, a virgin shall conceive, and bear a son"*. In Matthew 1.23, it is *"behold, a Virgin shall be with child, and shall bring forth a son."* In Luke's account of the Annunciation, Gabriel announces to Mary that *"behold, thou shalt conceive in thy womb, and bring forth a Son"* which is closer to the translation of Isaiah but with the addition of *"in thy womb"* which is more faithful, in a literal way, to the Greek. The word *"womb"* is part of the Greek expression for being pregnant, which means, literally, *"to have in the womb."* Luke has used the Greek verb *"to conceive"* in his account and this word, in particular, has carried over into the rich devotional traditions of song and motet in the Latin West, for instance, in the *"Ecce virgo concipiet,"* set to a great number of different musical settings. These variations bring out something of the special wonder of the Annunciation and the role of Isaiah's prophecy in shaping that devotional and doctrinal understanding.

"To have in the womb", *"to be with child"*, *"to conceive."* These are all ways of capturing the marvel and wonder of the Christmas story of Christ's birth but the word which carries

the greatest weight of prophetic meaning is the word, *"virgin"*, capitalized in the King James translation of Matthew's quotation from Isaiah but not capitalized in the translation of Isaiah itself. This one word is a critical feature of the doctrinal and devotional understanding of the Incarnation. And yet, it has been the occasion of considerable controversy and endless debate within the exegetical community. Why? Because the Hebrew word can equally be rendered as young maiden or young woman or girl. This has led some to discredit the idea of the Virgin Birth altogether.

There are two points to be observed here. First, the Greek translation of the Hebrew is actually older than the Hebrew texts which we have from the ninth century AD, the so-called Masoretic text, and while there is no reason to suspect that the Hebrew text used by the Greek translators was all that different in this case, the word, virgin, used by the Greek translators does not traduce the Hebrew *"almah"*, especially in the context of Isaiah. Secondly, it is not as if the whole understanding of the virgin birth stands simply upon a kind of Old Testament proof-texting; it belongs to a deeper reflection upon human redemption and upon the meaning of Jesus as the Divine Saviour. This challenges, too, it seems to me, the naturalistic assumptions of our world and day by opening us out to the power of God. That is part of the context of Isaiah's prophecy to Ahaz who trusted in the power of the King of Assyria rather than the power of God.

It is, as Pope Benedict XVI says, in his thoughtful treatment of the infancy narratives, *"a word in waiting;"*[1] in short, a word which awaits its fuller meaning and purpose and which is found in the story of Christ's coming and birth.

We are able to date this word from Isaiah with unusual precision to the year 733 BC and to the period of the Assyrian King, Tiglath-Pileser III, who was asserting his dominion over the Syro-Palestinian states. The Syrian King, Rezin, and Pekah, King of Israel, had wanted Ahaz, the King of Judah, to be part of a coalition against the Assyrian power but Ahaz, sensing the greater power of the Assyrian empire, had refused so they planned to wage war against him. He had countered this by the political cunning of entering into a protection treaty with the Assyrian king. From Isaiah's standpoint this meant putting his trust in the power of a king rather than in the power of God and submitting to an unholy power and worshiping their gods. As Benedict observes *"what was at stake here was ultimately not a political problem, but a question of faith."*[2]

In Isaiah's prophecy, God tells Ahaz that he has nothing to worry about from the *"two tails of these smoking firebrands,"* (vs. 4), referring to Syria and Israel, but adding that *"if ye will not believe, surely ye shall not be established"*(vs. 9). The Lord speaks again to Ahaz telling him to ask him for a sign whether from the depths of hell, we might say, or from

[1] Pope Benedict XVI, The Infancy Narratives: Jesus of Nazareth (Image, Crown Publishing Group, Random House, 2012).
[2] Benedict, Infancy Narratives, p. 47.

the heights of heaven so as to convince him about the power of God. This, too, it seems to me is remarkable. It speaks to the nature of God's engagement with our humanity. Faith cannot be blind faith. God wants Ahaz to see and recognize the divine power and truth which is greater than our political machinations and worldly schemes. He seeks our response to truth, our active willing of the truth of God, we might say. Ahaz responds with what is really a kind of mock piety, saying 'I will not put God to the test,' in effect *"indicat[ing] that he does not want to be disturbed in his Realpolitik."*[3] The contrast between Ahaz and Mary could not be greater; the one says 'no', the other, 'yes' to God.

But what, then, of this sign that God insists upon to the calculating and cynical Ahaz? How is it to be understood? Benedict refers to four interpretations of this passage only to conclude that they are all ambiguous and inconclusive: first, a type of the Messiah which at best could only be anticipated and is a later theme; second, God with us as signifying a son of Ahaz, which seems improbable in the context; third, one of the sons of the prophet Isaiah himself which also seems a stretch; and finally, the fourth theory, that the term Emmanuel has a collective significance as referring to the new Israel, the *"almah"*, the virgin, as symbolic of Zion. None of these approaches has any kind of historical resonance in the actual context. Thus the suggestion that it is *"a word in waiting,"* which is exactly how Matthew, and the *"entire Christian tradition"* with him, sees it. *"Though Jesus is not actually named Emmanuel, nevertheless he is Emmanuel, as the entire history of the Gospels seeks to demonstrate. This man – they tell us – in his very person is God's being-with-men. He is true man and at the same time God, God's true Son."*[4] We should recall, once again, that Luke has echoed Isaiah almost verbatim in his account of the Annunciation, changing only that the name of the child shall be called Jesus.

"A word in waiting." It is an intriguing concept. It belongs to Benedict's overall approach to the mystery of the Incarnation as seen through the infancy narratives. He argues that we are dealing with something historical which then demands an account, a reason or an explanation. Thus, things from the past, ambiguous and obscure in their own context, suddenly take on a whole new meaning and understanding. That happens because of the encounter with something that is new, revolutionary, and transforming; in short, the reality of the Incarnate Word and Son of the Father who is Emmanuel. And so, Isaiah shapes our understanding of the deeper mystery of God's engagement with our humanity. The sign for Ahaz has become a sign for the whole world. Put your trust in God not in man.

This provides the moment of transition to our last passage from Isaiah that shows, once again, the Advent in Isaiah; *Isaiah 40.1-11*. It is among the more popular and familiar passages in the post-Christian culture for no other reason, perhaps, than the power of Handel's *Messiah*. It marks the beginning of *Deutero-Isaiah*, what is also sometimes

[3] Benedict, Infancy Narratives, p. 48
[4] Benedict, Infancy Narratives, p. 48

called *The Book of the Consolation of Israel*. The opening chapter is magnificent and resounding in its phrases and patterns of glory. "*Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God.*" God speaks to us and he speaks to us about the only strength and comfort that there is, namely, his strength and comfort.

The passage is rich in its allusions to the Advent. It speaks of redemption, to be sure, but in terms of pardon and grace, of meaningful sacrifice and suffering; things which should give us pause to ponder. Pondering upon the Words of God is a Marian theme, to be sure. Being like Mary means pondering in our hearts, too, all the words which were said about her child. Advent awakens us to the power of God's Word coming to us and Isaiah is the great messenger of that Word. Here he speaks of "*a voice cry[ing] in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the Lord*" and immediately we are catapulted into the ministry and mission of John the Baptist. "*Art thou he that should come or do we seek for another,*" as we heard from Matthew (11.3) on *The Third Sunday in Advent*.

Jesus' response to John's question speaks of the fulfillment of the Messianic Kingdom in himself. "*Go and show John again, those things which ye do hear and see, the blind receive their sight, and the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, and the deaf hear, the dead are raised up, and the poor have the Gospel preached to them*"(Mt. 11. 4). What do we hear and see? The vision of our humanity redeemed and restored but only by virtue of the Word of God Incarnate; the Word of God with us is Jesus Christ.

This is what Isaiah 40.1-11 indicates to us and in so doing shapes our thinking about the radical nature of God's engagement with our humanity and, indeed, with the whole of the created order for "*every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low*" (vs. 4). God comes to us in the power of his almighty word; there is a complete and utter contrast between the passing and fading nature of this world. "*The grass withereth, the flower fadeth*" (vs. 7) and don't we know it! So, too, with us, and yet, in complete and utter contrast to the character and the vagaries of the finite world, "*the word of our God shall stand for ever*" (vs. 8). That is the Word which comes to us in the humanity of Christ.

Isaiah signals one of the great but often overlooked themes of the Advent. It is a penitential season, to be sure, a time when we intentionally recall the many and varied forms of human darkness. But far more than that it is a time of rejoicing, of rejoicing not in ourselves and in all our silly or great accomplishments, but in God's being with us whose Word abides for ever, and who leads us like a Shepherd for we are his sheep.

Isaiah 40 offers great consolation. It opens us out to the deep care of God for our humanity for this is the great wonder of the Advent, the wonder of the Advent in Isaiah. "*He shall feed his flocks like a shepherd: he shall gather the lambs with his arm, and carry them in his bosom, and shall gently lead those that are with young*" (vs. 11). The Advent in Isaiah opens us out to the theme of God's providential care for his people, to the

meaning of the one who comes for our good and blessing. We can look for no other but we can begin to understand that he has come to bring redemption and begin, even more, to see something of what that redemption looks like in ourselves and others. The Advent in Isaiah opens us out to the power and strength of the God whose *"word shall stand for ever."* May we hear and see the Advent in Isaiah.

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The Advent in Isaiah II
December 4th & 18th, 2012
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