

Psalm 125 Isaiah 26:12-19 1 Corinthians 15:1-11 St. Luke 18:9-14

The Gospel in which we stand

The years of the Prophet Isaiah's ministry were turbulent and troubling. The death of the Judaen King Uzziah in 740 BC, the year in which Isaiah received his clear call from the Lord to be His spokesman to the people, marked the end of a relatively peaceful period, and the remainder of Isaiah's ministry was filled with strife and sorrow and struggle. In 734 BC the northern kingdom of Israel formed a coalition with Syria against the rising empire of Assyria and together they attempted to force the southern kingdom of Judah to side with them. Ahaz was king of Judah at the time. In chapter seven of the book of Isaiah, we read all about the prophet's confrontation with this king as he was inspecting Jerusalem's water supply, in anticipation of a lengthy siege, and in this confrontation the underlying problem of this period was uncovered. Rather than rely on and trust in God by faith, the king chose to rely on and trust in the very Empire that was breathing down the Ancient Middle East's neck, namely Assyria itself. This implied rejection of the Lord brought forth from Isaiah a prophecy we today recognize as Messianic...the well-known prophecy about the coming of Immanuel...

Now, Israel and Syria paid dearly for their rebellion against Assyria as they came under Assyrian rule in about 734 BC...and then, eventually, after yet another rebellion, Israel ceased to exist as a nation in 722 BC. But, while Judah was spared in one sense in that Assyria did not annihilate them like their northern cousins, the subsequent kings were forced to play continuous cat and mouse games with the rising empires of the various periods in order to survive. But impatient patriotism and political imprudence still overshadowed faith and trust in God and as we read through the book of Isaiah we see

how much of the prophet's ministry was devoted to attempts to show God's people that to side with the world in dealing with their problems, regardless of the fact that everyone else was doing things that way (namely seeking alliances with some nations in order to fight against other nations), would eventually lead them down the garden path to destruction. And regardless of how hard the kings and the leaders of Judah tried to deliver themselves and their countrymen, their attempts proved futile time and again... and this is illustrated most graphically in our Old Testament lesson for today taken from Isaiah 26. Listen carefully again to the pitiful statement in verse 18. "We have been with child (in other words, they had the potential for new life), we have been in pain – or in labor (in other words, they tried hard to bring about that new life); [But then listen to the conclusion of all this self-effort.] We have, as it were, brought forth wind; we have not accomplished any deliverance in the earth (or land)." But the saddest thing is that they never seemed to get it...they never seemed to realize that their ways would just not cut it. All they needed to do was simply put their faith and trust in their God and wait on Him to provide the way out in His time...but no, even the best of them still kept a foot in the world and, in time, they too went into captivity with the prophecies of Isaiah ringing loudly in their ears.

But Isaiah was not all doom and gloom. Much of what the prophet had to say concerned a future time in which God would, indeed, provide the way out...not a political way...not even a physical way, strictly speaking...but rather a spiritual way in which the ultimate exile (namely our separation from God due to sin) would come to an end as God Himself made the way for us to return, not to the Promised Land, but rather to Paradise itself where we would enjoy uninterrupted fellowship with our Father.

Indeed, there are hints at this in our Old Testament reading. Look again at verse 12 and following and take note of the emphasis on Who is doing these things. “Lord, You will establish peace for us, for You have also done all our works in us. O Lord our God, masters besides You have had dominion over us; but by You only we make mention of Your Name.” Now listen to this carefully. “They (and he is speaking of the foreign masters here) are dead, they will not live; They are deceased, they will not rise.” Now let’s compare this statement with what God says to His people later in verse 19. “Your dead shall live; together with My dead Body they shall arise.” Do you see the contrast here? The foreign masters will die and not rise again, whereas God’s people, though dead, will come back to life again. Not to mention that this idea of them rising together with His dead Body is very interesting, but the difficult Hebrew construction could be translated differently, so don’t go to town with this one. But enough...back to verse 14b. “Therefore You have punished and destroyed them, and made all their memory to perish. You have increased the nation; You are glorified; You have expanded all the borders of the land.” And later, in the next chapter, Isaiah spoke of a specific day in which God would destroy, not the pagan nations, but rather the evil force behind them, namely satan himself, or, to use Isaiah’s language, Leviathan, the fleeing and twisted serpent, an image of the enemy taken, of course, from Genesis chapter 3.

But you see, the point of Isaiah’s message is that what Israel and indeed, humanity could not do for itself, God Himself promised to do...and, of course, on this side of the two Testaments, we know that He did so through His only begotten Son, Jesus Christ, our

Lord and Savior. And this, in and of itself, is the essential message of the Gospel in which we stand...

As St. Paul points out in our Epistle passage for today, the Gospel is basically the good news that God has done what we simply are not able to do, regardless of how many wonderful schemes we may come up with (and remember her Isaiah's image of being with child) and how hard we may try (again Isaiah's image of being in labor, but bringing forth nothing but wind). Just like the Pharisee in our Gospel lesson, we may proudly attempt to do all things right and then some, but in the end, it will be the sinner who cries out to God to do for him what he cannot do for himself that will be justified in the eyes of God, because that sinner will receive the promise by faith in God's grace and mercy, not by futile self-effort.

But in order for this Gospel to be effective, this Gospel has to be appropriated or, to use St. Paul's word, received. Again, the greatness of the Gospel is that it is not something we can come up with ourselves. If God's Holy Spirit does not reveal the truth of the Gospel to us, we will never get it...we will continue to live our lives as if we can fix all things ourselves, and we will continue to be frustrated by our failed efforts. You see, just like Israel under the various overlords of Egypt, Assyria, Babylon, Medo-Persia, Greece and Rome, all of us were once in bondage because of our sin. And our sin kept us from God and, indeed, kept us in the claws of the evil one. But just as God delivered Israel time and again from captivity, so He saved us from slavery to sin and to Satan, and because He has done this, we are also set free from death. That is the goal of the Gospel...to impart to us eternal salvation and present security.

But as Isaiah and others like him predicted, and as St. Paul and other New Testament authors confirmed, the content of the Gospel involved a Person...one known by various descriptions in the Old Testament, but collectively known as the Messiah. It was through this One...whether called the Seed of the woman, the Son of David, the Son of Man, the Servant of the Lord, the Second Adam...it was through Him that God would finally bring about a reversal of what we know as the Fall...that ultimate exile of humanity. It was this Man Who would finally provide the acceptable sacrifice for sin and thus render the penalty of death null and void. He was the One Who would fulfill all that the Old Testament looked forward to by dying in our place and rising from death to life again, as event of which several hundred people at the time of St. Paul could bear witness to. God did this because He knew that our sin made it impossible for us to achieve our own deliverance...in fact, elsewhere, St. Paul describes this inability to save ourselves as due to us being dead in our trespasses and sins. Corpses don't do much for themselves or for anyone else for that matter, now do they? And even though many do try to earn their way to heaven, so to speak, God knows that this is impossible and for this reason, He gave His only begotten Son to die for us...as a Man for Man...so that together with Jesus' resurrected dead Body, our dead bodies might also be resurrected and be raised up to be seated together with Him in the Heavenly Place...or, to use a different word for the same place, we would return with Him to be with Him forever in Paradise.

But now think of how ludicrous it would be for us to receive this Gospel and agree with this Gospel that we are not able to merit our own salvation, and yet then go on to live our lives as if we can achieve the impossible. What do I mean? Well, think on how many times in your life you have faced something far greater than yourself...or far greater than

anyone or anything you know...something you know is impossible to change or fix or whatever...be that death, disease or disaster...(like little Judah facing the enormous empire of Assyria. How many times have you attempted to fix it anyway? How many times have you thought that if you just do this or that or the next thing, that difficult issue or that difficult person or that difficult situation will change? Think on this, dearest beloved brethren. Can you save yourself? Can you change your heart by yourself? Can you change someone else's heart? Can you tell me exactly what will happen to you one second from now, let alone a day, or a week, or a year from now? So why live your lives as if you can accomplish what only God can accomplish? Isn't it far simpler to take it to Him in prayer and then to work alongside Him as He works it out for you, or with you or even through you?

So, think on these things, dear brothers and sisters in Jesus, especially as you come to partake of that which portrays the Gospel so graphically. Receiving Jesus is as simple as receiving this bread and wine...while none of us may ever be able to fully comprehend the entirety of the Gospel...its height, its depth, its width, and length...we may, in the simplicity of the Eucharist, be able to catch a glimpse of the mystery revealed in Jesus that God loved us so much that He did what He knew we couldn't do so that we might be free from slavery to sin and satan, so that we might be raised up from death to life, so that we might be able to enter into His glorious presence as His beloved sons and daughters. This is the Gospel in which we stand...