

Waiting on God (Isaiah 11: 1-10)

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The reading we've just heard from Isaiah is one of the most powerful evocations of shalom in Scripture. In my bible, it's given the heading 'The Peaceful Kingdom', although a former colleague, New Testament scholar David Neville, used to complain that the English word 'peace' is flaccid and pale compared with the richness of the biblical notion of 'shalom'. For shalom signifies not merely the absence of conflict or war. It's a vibrant, active well-being – a radical ecology of flourishing, where nothing and no-one lives in enmity or at the expense of anyone else.

In the state of shalom, as Isaiah imagines it, even what looks like natural hostility and habits of predation will be dissolved: 'The wolf shall live with the lamb; the leopard shall lie down with the kid'. The more powerful will no longer overwhelm the less powerful, but all will enjoy a radical mutuality: 'the calf, the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them'. In the state of shalom, what's more, humankind's susceptibility to the poison of falsity and self-alienation, symbolised in the book of Genesis by the serpent's seduction of Adam and Eve, will be healed from birth: 'the nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den'. And all this, life's refusal to 'hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain' will come to pass, the prophet says, because 'the earth will be full of the knowledge of the Lord, as the waters cover the sea'.

Well, it's a stunning vision. And yet, in a strange kind of way, when it's presented just like that, out of nowhere and so radically counter-factual, it can itself feel alienating. I remember once opening the door to a couple of Jehovah's Witnesses. It was a difficult time – I was struggling at work and in my personal life – and these well-meaning souls opened their copy of *The Watchtower* to an illustration of a lovely maned lion lying down with a plump and happy looking lamb, against a backdrop of abundant vegetation and flowing streams; they asked if that's how I

wanted life to be and began trying to persuade me that all this was possible if I ... believed, signed with the program, subscribed to the magazine. And I thought – ‘yeah right’ – this is just fantasy, wishful thinking, and it made me feel worse rather than better about my situation.

So – how are we to receive a vision like Isaiah’s? How does this promise of shalom help anything in the real world? What does it have to do with us, as we approach Christmas in the midst of crippling drought and fire?

Well, I want to start by saying a bit more about where this vision came from in the first place, the context in which it arose. The prophet Isaiah lived in the 8th century BCE, though the book bearing his name encompasses a much longer historical sweep. The first 39 chapters of Isaiah are linked directly to the lifetime of the prophet and Jerusalem’s confrontation with the mighty Assyrian Empire between 742 and 701 BCE; chapters 40-55 are commonly dated to 540, the period when the rising Persian Empire was displacing the brutal domination of Babylon; and chapters 56-66 are dated a little later, perhaps 520, when Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon went about the difficult task of reshaping their community after what Walter Brueggemann calls ‘its long, exilic jeopardy’.¹

In other words, what we have in the book of Isaiah is a corporate memory and interpretation of Israel’s experience through some of its toughest centuries. The book is a reading of history inaugurated by the original prophet, and then reworked into its final shape as a complex literary whole.² And the basic pattern of the story, the thread of theological interpretation that runs through the entire text, tells of a dynamic of judgement and restoration, of despair and hope. The book of Isaiah testifies to an abiding faith that out of the collapse brought on by human faithlessness and self-destruction, God can and will bring new life.

Which brings us to the stump of Jesse. Immediately preceding this passage, Isaiah has been speaking of the coming destruction of Jerusalem on account of the

¹ Walter Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39* (Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1998), p.3.

² Brueggemann, *Isaiah 1-39*, p.4.

corruption and self-deception of its ruling class, its king. 'Ah, you who make iniquitous decrees, who write oppressive statutes, to turn aside the needy from justice and to rob the poor of my people of their right ... What will you do on the day of punishment, in the calamity that will come from far away?' For 'the Lord of hosts, will lop the boughs with terrifying power; the tallest trees will be cut down'.

Some of the ways this story is rendered seem seriously problematic. God is said to allow, if not precipitate, the destruction of a faithless Jerusalem at the hands of foreign powers. There's talk of God's wrath, God's punishment. And something makes us rightly uneasy, I think, about characterising historical events in such terms. We're especially aware of the dangers here, when we see the likes of Israel Folau explaining our bushfires as a manifestation of divine wrath. But for all its superficial resonance with that kind of talk, Isaiah's theology is more sophisticated.

Because Isaiah is not saying, as contemporary prosperity gossellers suggest, that if you do wrong, you'll be punished and if you do right, you'll be rewarded. Rather, he's insisting that if you're untruthful and unjust, if you live against the grain of reality, then the structures you've built up will not ultimately stand. Eventually there'll be a collapse; that's just how it works – and you can ask the church and the banking industry in the wake of their Royal Commissions. And yet, the prophet also insists that whatever God's people get up to, however faithless we are, God remains faithful. It's as if, for Isaiah, it's the very nature of ultimate reality to bend towards us in compassion and mercy. There is always the possibility of forgiveness, a second chance, and at every moment God is seeking to bring forth new life from the ruins. 'Love is born', writes Michael Leunig, 'love is always born'. Or in Isaiah's language: something is always being given – 'see I am doing a new thing, do you not perceive it, now it springs forth'. But on this vision, and in contrast with the prosperity gospel, the ground of hope and regeneration lies not in us, not in our good deeds earning us our reward; rather for Isaiah, the ground of hope is simply, unfathomably, undeservedly ... God.

This understanding of God's nature gives rise to two characteristically prophetic responses – which are also Advent practices. One is the practice of *accountability*. In our faith tradition, God promises to be steadfastly loving, yet endlessly demanding. God never settles for us resigning ourselves to less than the vision of shalom. And we can expect that wherever our society, our politics, our personal lives are misaligned with the merciful, hospitable, non-rivalrous nature of God, there will be ultimately a reckoning. Reckoning, not in the sense of punishment or rejection, but in the sense of a confrontation with how things really are; reckoning in the sense of a call to become truer, more just, well.

Except – is that true? What about the wicked who prosper? What about the corporations making millions as they discredit climate science or disrupt democracy while others are already suffering the consequences of rising sea levels, unprecedented hurricanes and bushfires? Where's the reckoning for that? Well – there's a sense in which we must leave it to God – the God of justice and truth, who never settles for less than the vision of shalom. And this brings us to the second prophetic practice – the practice of waiting on God. Because if God is the primary actor here, the giver of shalom and enabler of its realisation on earth, then a key task of faithfulness is to look for and become attuned to what God is doing.

Every Advent we're reminded to 'wait' on the Lord. 'Waiting' in this context isn't like waiting for time to pass, or for the bus to come. It's a kind of attentive, focused, expectant waiting that's somehow necessary for the realisation of promise, even as it readies us to play our part. Think of the significance of waiting in the stories leading up to Jesus' birth – the anticipation of Anna and Simeon in the Temple, the openness of Zechariah, Elizabeth and Mary. There's power in this waiting, it precipitates something, makes a difference to what happens – it's efficacious, effects something in us and in the world. Thomas Merton spoke of this kind of 'waiting', this expectant and efficacious hope as the primary work of contemplatives, in his wonderful (if slightly martial) poem, 'The Quickening of John the Baptist'.

We are exiles in the far end of solitude [he writes], living as listeners
With hearts attending to the skies we cannot understand:
Waiting upon the first far drums of Christ the Conqueror,
Planted like sentinels upon the world's frontier.

I know the power of this intentional expectancy in my own life – when I've got to the end of what I can do, and instead of rushing frantically and fruitlessly around, I watch, wait and listen for what lies just beyond my ken. This way of being has changed my life, opened me to participate in things I'd never have dreamed possible.

What we're waiting for may take a long time – it's advent difficult to discern. But there will come a time, 'on that day' Isaiah says. On that day, those with eyes to see will see, will recognise what's afoot and be ready to join in.

Isaiah imagined God's act to restore Israel in terms of the coming of a king, an heir of Jesse's line, whose openness to the spirit of the Lord would enable true shalom for the land. In the Christian tradition, this imagery was connected to Jesus, who turned out to be a different kind of king, but still – we say – the agent of the earth's shalom, the very Prince of Peace. As we continue to deepen our Advent practice of waiting on God, may we know the joy of Christ's coming in our lives and for our troubled world.