

The Key to Mystery
The Fourth Sunday in Advent
(From the First Lesson: *Isaiah 40:1-11*)

[1] Comfort ye, comfort ye my people, saith your God. [2] Speak ye comfortably to Jerusalem, and cry unto her, that her warfare is accomplished, that her iniquity is pardoned: for she hath received of the LORD's hand double for all her sins. [3] The voice of him that crieth in the wilderness, Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God. [4] Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain: [5] And the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it. [6] The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodliness thereof is as the flower of the field: [7] The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. [8] The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever. [9] O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! [10] Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. [11] He shall feed his flock 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.

Wrapped up in this famous passage from Isaiah is a vision of the necessary preparation for the coming Kingdom of God. There is an air of breathless, electrifying expectation in the scene painted here. A herald has arrived to announce the arrival of none other than God Himself: *Prepare ye the way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God* (vs. 3b).

It reminds me of other scenes of preparation, common ones, like that which anticipates road repair or construction. Warning signs are put in place. Heavy equipment is moved in. Flaggers are engaged to control the traffic. Piles of rock, gravel, and fill are dumped nearby. Everything is put temporarily on hold while a season of disruption and inconvenience is endured, all for the purpose of allowing something much better to be brought to pass, something well worth the long, painful delay.

When God arrives, He too will be busily involved in a great renovation. It is one that will utterly transform the spiritual terrain: *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain* (4). From the flat expanse thus created *the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together: for the mouth of the LORD hath spoken it* (5).

This passage is part of a series of word-pictures of a dimension and beauty unequalled anywhere else in Scripture, found in Isaiah chapters 40-66. They also are a tremendous mystery, an unsolvable riddle, to which Christ Himself alone is the Key. As we proceed from this point in Isaiah's prophecy on through the end of his book, we are confronted with apparently irreconcilable concepts. They seem to defy harmonization. There is the promise of all the blessings of the messianic kingdom, a vision of such grand scale that our hearts are filled with longing and won-

der. But in the very midst a void of darkness and night seems to open like a gulf before us, as we read of a Suffering Servant, a man who...

hath no form nor comeliness; and when we shall see him, there is no beauty that we should desire him. He is despised and rejected of men; a man of sorrows, and acquainted with grief: and we hid as it were our faces from him; he was despised, and we esteemed him not. (53:2b-3)

Our amazement and confusion only grows as we continue reading:

Surely he hath borne our griefs, and carried our sorrows: yet we did esteem him stricken, smitten of God, and afflicted. But he was wounded for our transgressions, he was bruised for our iniquities: the chastisement of our peace was upon him; and with his stripes we are healed. (53:4-5)

For the people of Israel, the time and nature of Messiah's arrival and ministry have always provoked uncertainty and speculation. It is only with the retrospect provided by the Gospels that the great apparent contradictions are made clear: there are *two* Advents. Listen to how the Book of Hebrews sums it up: *So Christ was once offered to bear the sins of many; and unto them that look for him shall he appear the second time without sin unto salvation (9:28)*. Even the herald described in today's text, fulfilled in the person of John the Baptist, did not understand how to reconcile the Messiah he saw in Jesus Christ with his own understanding of the concept. Nor did the disciples, as Christ's public ministry became subject to scorn, rejection, and hatred that culminated in barbaric crucifixion. How could this lowly Galilean be the restorer of all things? Where indeed was the promised Kingdom, and when would it be inaugurated?

But this is the very stuff of God, who declares to us later in this same great portion of Scripture:

...my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways, saith the LORD. For as the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways, and my thoughts than your thoughts (55:8-9).

Look again at today's text: *Every valley shall be exalted, and every mountain and hill shall be made low: and the crooked shall be made straight, and the rough places plain (40:4)*. The process of demolition must be absolutely complete. Nothing can be left standing, neither theory, nor dream, nor expectation, nor speculation...*all* must give way before the Lord, who will do things in His own way, in His own time, so as to properly defy and humble all human pride, so that alone *the glory of the LORD shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together (5)*.

Through the manner in which God has chosen to work His perfect will, He succeeds in a process of both utter destruction and complete renovation. But the nature of that task is far more complicated and involved than mere human understanding can grasp. The greatest impediment to His Lordship --that most stubborn of mountains and hills to be *made low*-- is the sin of man. To eradicate it, to completely remove it, He must Himself bear it: *the LORD hath laid on him the iniquity of us all (53:6b)*. He must come and be rejected by His own people, although He in substitutionary sacrifice carries their very sins in His own Person. It is a Story beyond wonder, at

once plumbing the depths of sadness, yet filled with love past telling. Thus does the Lord prepare the ground of human hearts for His arrival.

But there is more, for He will appear yet again, now in great triumph and judgment, both to receive those who are among the redeemed, and to confront and eliminate His enemies, once and for all. All of that which stubbornly, proudly refuses the redemptive work of divine love that serves to eradicate the sin of man, must itself be finally eradicated. For these, today's passage contains a great warning:

The voice said, Cry. And he said, What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the goodness thereof is as the flower of the field: The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: because the spirit of the LORD bloweth upon it: surely the people is grass. The grass withereth, the flower fadeth: but the word of our God shall stand for ever (6-8).

Man is compared with *grass*. What does this say about governments that reject God? About laws that go against Scripture? About the institutions and learned men to whom we turn in the hour of need and calamity? About all the bright, blinking idols with which the land is filled? Regardless of what materials they are constructed from, they cannot resist the power of the wind of *the spirit of the LORD* which *bloweth upon* them (7). Surely even now, such a wind is blowing against them!

For Christ's enemies, His Second Coming is bad news...bad news, indeed. But for us it is *good tidings* (9a)! For those for whom the great enigma of these prophetic texts has been completely resolved in Jesus Christ, there is a mission, a glorious mission:

O Zion, that bringest good tidings, get thee up into the high mountain; O Jerusalem, that bringest good tidings, lift up thy voice with strength; lift it up, be not afraid; say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God! Behold, the Lord GOD will come with strong hand, and his arm shall rule for him: behold, his reward is with him, and his work before him. He shall feed his flock 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. (9-11)

Advent is a time both of remembrance and anticipation. We look for the great vindication promised by the prophets, when God will arrive both to rule and to reward. But we also remember His First Coming, when He appeared to take away the sins of the world. While the unbelieving world lives in dread anticipation of the end, we dwell in security based on faith. The One who lived among us, whose glory was hidden within the veil of human flesh, and who left with the promise of His return, and who gave us His Spirit as a pledge,...He *will* fulfill His Word.

Let us pray:

Stir up, O Lord, Thy power, and come; and mercifully fulfill that which Thou hast promised to Thy Church unto the end of the world. Through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen. (From Ancient Collects and Other Prayers...)

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.