

**BIBLE STUDY NOTES BY TONY BARTLETT**

**SECOND ISAIAH: ISAIAH 40-55**

**CHAPTER 40. 1-11**

Second Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55) can justly claim to be the single densest source of Jesus' gospel in the Hebrew scriptures. It contains so many genetic elements it is like the African continent to the human species, the space in which our foremothers and forefathers first appeared--in this case it is the place where the distinctive traces of the radically new humanity preached by the prophet Jesus first emerged.

When questioned by John the Baptist about whether he was "the one who is to come" Jesus answers with a record of his activity that reads like a greatest hits list from the prophet Isaiah. "Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind regain their sight, the lame walk, lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have the good news proclaimed to them" (Luke 7.20-22 Note: translations are taken from the New American Bible unless otherwise stated). For sure this covers the whole range of textual Isaiah, which shows the influence of all this astonishing prophecy (26.19, 29.18-19, 35.5-6, 42.7, 61.1-2a), but when we look to the deep redemptive program of the gospels it is Second Isaiah that provides the really significant elements.

Here is the release of the captives, the overturning of the lethal effect of empires but not by repetition of their military methods. Here is good news for the poor, the joy of God's kingly return to Zion, but not for the Davidic monarchy nor its temple priesthood. Here is sight for the blind, where blindness means something much more than simply physical inability to see. Here is the true shepherd of Israel, leading and carrying the sheep, producing a characteristic atmosphere of trust, gentleness and love. Here, most profoundly, is the Servant of YHWH, the one who will startle nations and render kings speechless, the one who gives his life and does not retaliate and yet somehow brings all prior history and culture to a shattering halt.

Chapter forty begins almost at once with the voice of one crying out in the desert: "Prepare the way of the Lord!" (v.3). These words are included near the beginning of all four canonical gospels and explicitly named from Isaiah, testifying to the embedded role of Second Isaiah in the gospel story and its written accounts. What is being announced in this verse is God's personal return to Zion, reversing the departure of God's glory from the temple and city dramatically depicted by the prophet Ezechiel (chapter 10). But rather than an Ezechiel-style return of God's terrifying chariot and cherubim there is the Lord's presence directly to and among the defenseless returnees from exile. "Like a shepherd he feeds his flock; in his arms he gathers the lambs, carrying them in his bosom, and leading the ewes with care" (11). Here then is the "good news" (gospel) of Second Isaiah that the prophet announces and Jerusalem echoes back, the core message of which is "Here is your God...the Lord God who rules..." (9c-10a).

Implied and inseparable is the emotive heart of the prophecy that generates the note of consolation at the very first verses: "Comfort, give comfort to my people, says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem..." (1-2) How close are we here to the initial words of Jesus'

kingdom discourse in Luke given with typical Jesus-style economy: "Blessed are you who are poor, for the kingdom of God is yours" (6.20). In both instances, Isaiah and Jesus, there is the deliberate atmosphere that is itself transformative and constitutes already perhaps one half of the good news--a distinctive new tonality producing a relationship of trust, gentleness and love.

The announcement here of "good news" is paralleled at 52.7-10, immediately before the fourth poem of the Servant, the one that most comprehensively and movingly describes the Servant's sufferings. There is thus an effective textual link from the introductory passage of this prophecy to the most powerfully mysterious--or, as I would term it, most abyssal<sup>1</sup>--point of the prophecy, the place where we encounter the figure who breaks definitively with the structures of rivalry and retaliatory violence and so introduces an entirely new possibility into human existence. We will approach this point progressively through the study but already the textual link with the Servant suggests a literary "inclusion" with the figure of the prophet. The vocation of the prophet is described immediately before this announcement of good news and therefore stands in vital personal proximity to it (vv.6-8).

In the account of the prophetic call the prophet is told by a voice to cry out a message. The prophet's obedience--"What shall I cry out?"--reminds us of the Servant's listening ear (50.4). In answer he is told: "All flesh is grass" (Hebrew text) and its "constancy is like the flower of the field. The grass withers, the flower fades, when the breath of the Lord blows upon it" (7 NRSV). The message itself is taken classically as announcing that all flesh lies under God's judgment. Paradoxically the very thing that gives life, God's breath (see Genesis 2.7), condemns the flesh to death by blowing on it. This is already suggested at Genesis 6.3: "My spirit [breath] shall not abide in mortals for ever, for they are flesh" (NRSV). If this is understood dualistically then we have the realm of the human--the earth, the material, the flesh, contrasted with the realm of the eternal--heaven, the spiritual, the soul. And in this way we head straight down the blind alley of Platonic metaphysics. But if the terms are understood anthropologically--i.e. in terms of the cultural constitution of humanity--then everything becomes infinitely more dynamic.

God's spirit blows upon the present constitution of human affairs--upon flesh and its "constancy" which is the mode of relationship of cultures founded in generative violence--to bring them to definitive crisis. But in contrast and parallel to the collapse produced in the present order "the word of our God stands forever" (8). This word is the organic unity of what the prophet hears from God and understands God as doing. Word and deed in Hebrew are always taken as a single reality. This unity of God's action reaches forward from the judgment upon human history and institutions, represented most powerfully by the

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<sup>1</sup> From Anthony's book, Cross Purposes, an early description of abyssal compassion... "Our modern or postmodern situation can justly be construed in and by the image of the abyss. The gospel event of the cross may be understood to take place in the human abyss--the depth of injustice, meaninglessness and horror it can sink to--indeed, to reveal it to humanity. And at the same moment a redemption by the cross may be glimpsed to arise in the abyss, to change it from within into a place of radically new possibility, to effect an absolute novelty of human selfhood. The final and true referent of this term, its resting place, therefore, is not a darkness, a chasm, a pit in the heart of the world. On the contrary, it is the active moment itself of the gospel, a moment, until then unimaginable, of life, of hope. It is the act or moment of *abyssal compassion*, much more a verb than a noun, in the sense of moment as movement. This is the real starting point of these reflections, and without it the concept of the abyss is of course intolerable. (p. 18)

destruction of Jerusalem and subsequent exile, to the amazing opening up of gospel compassion and nonviolence represented by the prophet's whole message of consolation and including most profoundly the figure of the Servant.

The impossible communication of a new way of being human is destined to outlast and replace everything that now seems so relentlessly, ruthlessly, fatally human.

**Isaiah 40:1-11 (NRSV)**

- 1 Comfort, O comfort my people,  
says your God.
- 2 Speak tenderly to Jerusalem,  
and cry to her  
that she has served her term,  
that her penalty is paid,  
that she has received from the LORD'S hand  
double for all her sins.
- 3 A voice cries out:  
"In the wilderness prepare the way of the LORD,  
make straight in the desert a highway for our God.
- 4 Every valley shall be lifted up,  
and every mountain and hill be made low;  
the uneven ground shall become level,  
and the rough places a plain.
- 5 Then the glory of the LORD shall be revealed,  
and all people shall see it together,  
for the mouth of the LORD has spoken."
- 6 A voice says, "Cry out!"  
And I said, "What shall I cry?"  
All people are grass,  
their constancy is like the flower of the field.
- 7 The grass withers, the flower fades,  
when the breath of the LORD blows upon it;  
surely the people are grass.
- 8 The grass withers, the flower fades;  
but the word of our God will stand forever.
- 9 Get you up to a high mountain,  
O Zion, herald of good tidings;℣  
lift up your voice with strength,  
O Jerusalem, herald of good tidings,℣  
lift it up, do not fear;  
say to the cities of Judah,  
"Here is your God!"
- 10 See, the Lord GOD comes with might,  
and his arm rules for him;  
his reward is with him,  
and his recompense before him.
- 11 He will feed his flock like a shepherd;

he will gather the lambs in his arms,  
and carry them in his bosom,  
and gently lead the mother sheep.

Study suggestions:

1. It's important to distinguish between the Scriptures quoted, or alluded to by Jesus, and those used by the Evangelists. Anthony says above that "Second Isaiah (chapters 40 to 55) can justly claim to be the single densest source of Jesus' gospel in the Hebrew Scriptures." How many quotes or allusions to the Hebrew Scriptures *by Jesus* can you or your group find?
2. Anthony contrasts the ways of God's coming in Second Isaiah with those of "empire." The restoration of the exiles will not result from God's behavior as a bringer of more violence. Who are the exiles God desires to bring home in today's world? In your community? In your parish? How will God's way of doing this vary from the world's expectations?
3. Tony reads "flesh" from verse 7 (translating directly from the Hebrew, unfortunately the NRSV says "people") in the same way that Paul uses "flesh" (*sarx*), as an umbrella term for all the deadly components that constitute human "culture." He contrasts this with the dualistic interpretation most readers have when they oppose "flesh" and "spirit." How do you or your group 1) also fall into the Platonic trap of opposing our physical being to our spiritual being? 2) see God's breath blowing on our culture, our "flesh" today, causing it (graciously) to wither?