

SECOND ISAIAH STUDY, # 6. 43.14--44.8

In our study of Second Isaiah it's time to pause and start over. You know...like a piece of music that comes to a full stop only suddenly to begin again, with all the joy of the tune lingering in your brain playing again, afresh.

By now we are aware of most of the major themes in 2nd Isaiah, of the wonderful new note of gentleness and nonviolence, of the singularity of Israel's God that goes with it, the claim of this God to be sole source of creation, before whom the nations are a nothing, a void, exactly in the same way as was the primordial emptiness prior to creation. We have seen the cultural subversion at work in this message, and hand in hand and ever more insistent, the strange enchanting discomfiting figure of the Servant.

To what could we compare this? Perhaps a barren landscape, with broken rocks and dust, nothing to suggest a human environment...then suddenly, as if on the surface of Mars, appears a dwelling, beautiful in construction and material, more than adequate to sustain life. Who or what could have done this?

The image is different from that of the famous "argument from design," where someone finds a watch in the desert and concludes there must be intelligent thought behind this. The watch becomes a metaphor for the universe, and so, the argument goes, there must be a divine mind behind the universe...a rational inference. Here instead is the possibility of human existence, a place to dwell, to live and be at peace: and so, we conclude, there must be an intention of human life behind this building. An anthropological inference. The God of Israel is at work to bring about the full and perfect life of humanity.

If we look at the study in this way then it loses all purely academic, historical or supernatural reference. It becomes, along with so much else in the bible, a singular event, equivalent to the emergence of matter itself, of the first living organism, and even more than that. It is the emergence of true human possibility, the possibility of human life that we all dream and long for, a life without carping care, without built-in dissatisfaction, without envy, hatred, anger, death.

And is not the study is more urgent still because the crisis of decision is upon us? Are we not facing all around us day after day renewed evidence of the unsustainability of human existence based on rivalry, alienation, greed, power, violence? More and more the text of the bible comes to be seen not as an education in righteousness for the sake of an other-worldly reward but an education in humanity for the sake of true life on earth. And this is God's doing. The God of 2nd Isaiah points forward to chapter twenty one of Revelation where "the home of God is among mortals (in the heavenly city on earth). He will dwell with them; they will be his peoples, and God himself will be with them; he will wipe every tear from their eyes. Death will be no more; mourning and crying and pain will be no more, for the first things have passed away" (3-4).

So, now, when we turn anew to the text of our study (43.14-44.8) we hear precisely this note of human recreation, and with renewed insistence. "I am the Lord, your Holy One, the

Creator of Israel, your King...I am about to do a new thing; now it springs forth, do you not perceive it? I will make a way in the wilderness and rivers in the desert. The wild animals will honor me, the jackals and the ostriches; for I give water in the wilderness, rivers in the desert, to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise" (15, 19-21 NRSV) Did the writer mean simply in a literal way that the startling new intervention by God--one decisively to outstrip the glory of the Exodus (16-18)--would be new rivers in the desert? A technical triumph/miracle in the steppes? Certainly the prophet would be sending a vivid image of encouragement to returnees from exile who would have to make the arid trek somewhere along the northern fringes of Arabia. But this remains a matter of the particular journeys made by groups of Jews from Babylon, none of the details of which Isaiah or anyone else bothers to record. As the prophet paints the picture it is indeed only the wild animals who are public witnesses of the watering of the desert.

No, the true miracle is the creation of a people in and through the events of the return, with a distinctive new sensibility of what it means to be this people: "I am about to do a new thing...I give water in the wilderness ...to give drink to my chosen people, the people whom I formed for myself so that they might declare my praise." The flowering of the desert is simply the external physical symbol of this radical human newness. It signifies the dwelling space for humankind in conditions where such a dwelling would at first seem impossible. It is the reconstruction of humanity away from its age-old dependence on force, foundational violence, cities, temples, bloodshed, moving instead toward gentleness, compassion, trust, nonviolence. That is why the prophet pointedly records the original miracle of Exodus-- "Thus says the Lord, who opens a way in the sea, and a path in the mighty waters. Who leads out chariot and horsemen, a powerful army, till they lie prostrate together, never to rise, snuffed out and quenched like a wick..."--only to comment that it should no longer be remembered: "Remember not the events of the past, the things of long ago consider not..." (16-18). The new thing that the Lord is doing founds a community on a new generative principle (water in the desert), deeper and more truly re-creative than the liberation by force of the Hebrew slaves.

And so at once the prophet turns to the symbolic center of the culture of violence, the temple. The text here is condensed but it seems that the complaint of verse 23 (that in the period of exile, and afterward, the Israelites did not make sacrifices) is ironical because in fact there was no temple in which to do so; it had been destroyed. This sense is made explicit when God then declares the situation to be his doing, saying: "I have not burdened you with (the practice of) offerings, or wearied you with frankincense" (23 c & d). The latter means in Hebrew: "I have not wearied you with demands for incense." In other words, you did not do the usual religious cultic things which you use to show devotion, but that's also because you could not, and you could not because in point of fact I didn't want it. The irony is further played out by contrasting the absence of the sacrificial burden with very present sinfulness: "I have not burdened you...or wearied you...but you have burdened me with your sins; you have wearied me with your iniquities (23 c & d, 24 c & d NRSV).

We have here the classic prophetic critique of temple sacrifice now become irony after the fact. But the irony has a profound point for it is also a place of spiritual opportunity. The forced loss of the means of cult becomes a wonderful empty space in which to emphasize immediate personal relationship. And this happens to an extraordinary degree when into the

empty space of no-temple explodes a great first-person thunderbolt of divine forgiveness, regardless of temple sacrifice: "I, I am He who blots out your transgressions for my own sake, and I will remember not your sins" (25 NRSV). In one stroke the whole apparatus of temple offering for sin crumbles. God moves with absolute sovereignty outside all the structures devised by humans to order relationship with him. For sure, the text does labor ironically with the enormous traditional value given to temple and sacrifice--plans were most probably already under way to build the second temple. But the prophet's double-edged voice and then the great proclamation of personal forgiveness make plain the real prophetic dynamic. The business of burnt offerings and fat of sacrifices is part of the old order of humanity now made obsolete by a relationship with God drained of all foundational violence. And, as always, this is only God's doing, the doing of God who speaks and acts singly and autonomously, "I, I am He who (acts)... for my own sake..."

There follows an apparent reversal: God calls his people to a trial. Second Isaiah had announced a summons to trial before in respect of the nations (41.2, 21-4, 43.8-13). Now it is the people who are indicted and all the way back to a patriarchal ancestor, probably Jacob (see Hosea 12.3-4), and also including all the priestly interpreters of the law (26-7). The judgment is terrible: the princes of the sanctuary, the priests, are thrown down, and the whole people are put under ban, in other words, destroyed utterly, irreversibly. How does this horrifying extermination fit with the just-announced divine forgiveness, either emotionally or historically? The answer must be in relation to the project of human recreation represented by the whole story of the people. They are not in fact exterminated, but their previous mode of existence as a people--one hinging especially around the function of priests and temple--is erased in order that something qualitatively new might take its place. Once again this new thing is decisively a matter of personal relationship, something at once and strikingly expressed in the following verses.

How beautiful are these expressions of loving relationship and how obviously do they understand the flowering of the desert in terms of human recreation! "Hear then, O Jacob, my servant... Thus says the Lord who made you, your help, who formed you from the womb: Fear not...the darling whom I have chosen" (44. 1-2). I think the NAB version is correct in translating the Hebrew *Jeshurun* as a term of endearment or privileged relationship--the other contexts in which it appears (Dt.32.15; 33.5, 26) say as much. The prophet of Second Isaiah now capitalizes on this sense to headline the quantum shift of relationship accompanying the return from exile. "I will pour out water upon the thirsty ground, and streams upon the dry land; I will pour out my spirit upon your offspring, and my blessing on your descendants. They shall spring up amid the verdure like poplars beside the flowing waters" (3-4). In previous biblical tradition, including Isaiah itself, the spirit of God is given to leaders for specific historical purposes not to the whole people generally and indeterminately. Now God's relationship with his people is no longer a matter of particular historical purposes but an end in itself, bringing with it overflowing life, life to make barren ground break forth in lush growth. And now we understand the meaning of the terrible "ban;" unless all previous cultural moorings were snapped the new possibility of exponential life could not appear.

Verse five gives an image of reciprocal love on the part of the people. They will tattoo on their hands the Lord's name to show their utter commitment to him. But the sense also reaches out beyond the borders of Israel, with foreign people adopting the identity of

"Jacob" and taking "Israel" as their name. Such will be the magnetic power of the new humanity created by this relationship with God that other peoples will voluntarily forsake their old identities and take on that of Israel. Or, put another way, the people blessed by the spirit will irresistibly overflow their own boundaries to encompass others in the human transformation brought about by their God. The section ends with a repetition of the unique claims of this God--the first and the last, besides whom there is no other (6). Once again this makes perfect sense not as a canceling out of other gods in a struggle of rival cultures and theologies. My god is better than yours! These singular claims flow logically not from such old-order conflict but from the place of human recreation that the prophet had entered and understood and, with that, the definitively "other" meaning of the God who was bringing this about. If humanity's constitution was no longer on the basis of armies, of temples, of sacrifice, of violence, then an utterly divergent sense of the divine both accompanied it and necessarily brought it to being.

Only the one true God indeed could do this, could break the seamless human culture of death and institute the possibility of a culture based entirely on life. The role thereafter of Israel was to be a witness of this absolutely astonishing event of recreation (8), the discovery in the wilderness of a place of boundless life. Even so the harsh Marscape of human history is suddenly blessed by a wondrous new construction, one where human life may truly dwell.

^{43:14} Thus says the LORD,
your Redeemer, the Holy One of Israel:
For your sake I will send to Babylon
and break down all the bars,
and the shouting of the Chaldeans will be turned to lamentation. □

¹⁵ I am the LORD, your Holy One,
the Creator of Israel, your King.

¹⁶ Thus says the LORD,
who makes a way in the sea,
a path in the mighty waters,

¹⁷ who brings out chariot and horse,
army and warrior;
they lie down, they cannot rise,
they are extinguished, quenched like a wick:

¹⁸ Do not remember the former things,
or consider the things of old.

¹⁹ I am about to do a new thing;
now it springs forth, do you not perceive it?
I will make a way in the wilderness
and rivers in the desert.

²⁰ The wild animals will honor me,
the jackals and the ostriches;
for I give water in the wilderness,
rivers in the desert,
to give drink to my chosen people,

²¹ the people whom I formed for myself
so that they might declare my praise.

22 Yet you did not call upon me, O Jacob;
but you have been weary of me, O Israel!

23 You have not brought me your sheep for burnt offerings,
or honored me with your sacrifices.
I have not burdened you with offerings,
or wearied you with frankincense.

24 You have not bought me sweet cane with money,
or satisfied me with the fat of your sacrifices.
But you have burdened me with your sins;
you have wearied me with your iniquities.

25 I, I am He
who blots out your transgressions for my own sake,
and I will not remember your sins.

26 Accuse me, let us go to trial;
set forth your case, so that you may be proved right.

27 Your first ancestor sinned,
and your interpreters transgressed against me.

28 Therefore I profaned the princes of the sanctuary,
I delivered Jacob to utter destruction,
and Israel to reviling.

44:1 But now hear, O Jacob my servant,
Israel whom I have chosen!

2 Thus says the LORD who made you,
who formed you in the womb and will help you:
Do not fear, O Jacob my servant,
Jeshurun whom I have chosen.

3 For I will pour water on the thirsty land,
and streams on the dry ground;
I will pour my spirit upon your descendants,
and my blessing on your offspring.

4 They shall spring up like a green tamarisk,
like willows by flowing streams.

5 This one will say, "I am the LORD'S,"
another will be called by the name of Jacob,
yet another will write on the hand, "The LORD'S,"
and adopt the name of Israel.

6 Thus says the LORD, the King of Israel,
and his Redeemer, the LORD of hosts:
I am the first and I am the last;
besides me there is no god.

7 Who is like me? Let them proclaim it,
let them declare and set it forth before me.
Who has announced from of old the things to come?[□]
Let them tell us[□] what is yet to be.

8 Do not fear, or be afraid;
have I not told you from of old and declared it?
You are my witnesses!

Is there any god besides me?

There is no other rock; I know not one.

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Some questions for discussion.

1. In a wonderful shift of metaphor, Dr. Bartlett helps us move from the discovery of a God who designs to a God who creates, becomes a home. Having stumbled upon this lovely dwelling place, what do you find within? How does this home enable us to move from rivalry to peace?
2. Dr. Bartlett describes the utter destruction of the “ban” as a necessary pre-requisite for the creation of a new humanity, not a destruction in the literal sense, but a destruction of our ways of being together so as to create space for the new. Can you see any signs of that destruction going on around you? Can we learn to see this without fear, perhaps even with anticipation?
3. The singularity of the God for whom Isaiah speaks can be scandalous in today’s world of pluralities. How can we claim this God who re-creates humanity apart from violence as the *only* God without falling into the trap of mimetic rivalry, “My God is better than yours?”