



Ordinary Time: All Saints to Advent

Wednesday 27 November

Psalms 110, 111, 112

or 110, 111, 112

Isaiah 40.27 – 41.7

Revelation 16.1-11

Isaiah 40.27 – 41.7

'I, the Lord, am first, and will be with the last' (41.4)

The possibility of the exiles returning to Jerusalem depended on the defeat of the Babylonians by the Persian king, Cyrus the Great (c. 600–530 BC), in 540 BC. He is mentioned by name in Isaiah 44.28 and 45.1. Isaiah 41.2-4 refers to him, though unnamed, as 'a victor from the east' and describes his rapid advance on Babylon ('scarcely touching the path with his feet'). But this is not said in order to glorify Cyrus. Instead, his military success is ascribed to the God of Israel, who is using him to make possible the liberation of his own people. Isaiah himself, back in the eighth century, had seen the Assyrian conquest of Israel as possible only because the Assyrian king (Sennacherib) was a tool used by God to punish his own people (Isaiah 10.5).

Now, in the new age God was inaugurating, a foreign king was again God's instrument, only this time for their liberation and well-being, rather than for destruction. In the modern world, this understanding of God as moving the pieces on the chessboard of the world is problematic, for Christians as for agnostics. It rightly stresses the weakness and subordinate position of even the greatest empire when compared with God, who is both 'first and last' (this brings to mind Revelation 22.13, 'the Alpha and Omega' – as we might say, 'the A to Z'). But it can also encourage us to identify God's hand at work in the rise and fall of nations, which is a difficult task. How can we take the prophetic message seriously, while avoiding over-simple judgements about world politics?

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Eternal Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven
that he might rule over all things as Lord and King:
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit
and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

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Ordinary Time: All Saints to Advent

Psalms 125, 126, 127, 128
 or 113, 115
 Isaiah 41.8-20
 Revelation 16.12-end

Thursday 28 November**Isaiah 41.8-20**

'I will make the wilderness a pool of water' (v.18)

In a country with large areas of parched ground, thirst was a more familiar, frequent, and threatening experience than it commonly is in many modern cities, especially in temperate climates. Provision of superabundant water was therefore a natural image for divine care for people, as well as an obvious example of literal salvation from death. Verses 17-20 here are one of the most vivid illustrations of this theme in the Bible. Abundant water also means that trees can take root and flourish. In the new order the prophet envisages, this will happen even in the desert!

In ancient Israel it must have seemed that only a miracle could plant, for example, cypress trees in barren land. How far did the prophet think of these predictions as literal, how far as symbolic of 'spiritual' blessing? Perhaps both, though Christian readings sometimes gloss over the literal meaning of passages like this too readily. The prophet speaks about an actual return to the land, and its (divinely-given) enhancement to provide for an enormously expanded population (Isaiah 49.19-23). This continues to resonate with the Christian hope for a new world order: perhaps what it will be like when God creates 'new heavens and a new earth' (Isaiah 65.17, also Revelation 21.1). But it is important to recognize that the Bible also thinks of concrete physical reality, of significant change in the political realm, and even in the natural world, as part of God's work in renewing the world he has made.

God the Father,
 help us to hear the call of Christ the King
 and to follow in his service,
 whose kingdom has no end;
 for he reigns with you and the Holy Spirit,
 one God, one glory.

COLLECT

Reflection by John Barton

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Ordinary Time: All Saints to Advent

Friday 29 November

Psalm 139
Isaiah 41.21 – 42.9
Revelation 17

Isaiah 41.21 – 42.9

*'The former things have come to pass, and new things
I now declare' (42.9)*

The prophet ridicules the 'gods' worshipped by other peoples for being unable to foretell the future. Israel's God, by contrast, had 'declared to Zion' the rise of 'one from the north' (that is, Cyrus), and had correctly predicted his conquests. This is the difference between the true God and the other 'gods'. After this the writer launches into the first of what are sometimes called the 'Servant Songs' (42.1-7) – passages within Isaiah that can be lifted out as originally (perhaps) free-standing poems. There is no agreement among biblical scholars about the identity of the 'servant'. It may have been the exiled king, Jehoiachin; maybe a contemporary leader, conceivably even the prophet himself; maybe the personified corporate body of the exiles, or even of those who had *not* been exiled; maybe even Cyrus, which is just about conceivable, given that in 45.1 he is described, amazingly, as God's 'anointed one' (*mashiah*, the word we know as 'messiah').

Christian tradition has seen all the 'Servant Songs' as prophecies of the sufferings and vindication of Jesus. This one portrays a 'servant' who is a 'light to the nations'. Christians saw this as fulfilled in the mission to the Gentiles that St Paul undertook in the name of Jesus (see Romans 15). Whatever the original intention of the Song, it is difficult as a Christian not to feel that it resonates with such a theme, and this impression is enhanced when all four Songs are read in Holy Week.

COLLECT

Eternal Father,
whose Son Jesus Christ ascended to the throne of heaven
that he might rule over all things as Lord and King;
keep the Church in the unity of the Spirit
and in the bond of peace,
and bring the whole created order to worship at his feet;
who is alive and reigns with you,
in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
one God, now and for ever.

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Ordinary Time: All Saints to Advent

Psalms 47, 147.1-12
 Ezekiel 47.1-12
 or Ecclesiasticus 14.20-end
 John 12.20-32

Saturday 30 November

Andrew the Apostle

Ezekiel 47.1-12*'Water was flowing from below the threshold of the temple' (v.1)*

Today is the feast of St Andrew, the apostle of Jesus and brother of Simon Peter, and this is one of the readings appointed for his day – though the reason for this is not clear. It does, however, pick up the theme of life-giving water found in an earlier reading this week (Isaiah 41.8-20). Ezekiel sees water flowing into the Dead Sea and miraculously desalinating it, so that it becomes a habitat for fish like those of the 'Great Sea' (the Mediterranean), and fishermen start to spread their nets in it. Just as in Isaiah's prophecy barren land begins to yield crops and to support trees because God irrigates it, so what with good reason we call the 'Dead' Sea will become fresh and life-giving. The trees along its banks will be exceptionally fruitful, yielding their fruit not just annually, but every month. Even their leaves will have medicinal properties. All this is because the water originates from under the threshold of the renewed temple: it is holy water, therefore, that blesses whatever it touches.

Though the picture conjured up is a strange one to most modern readers, the inner meaning is clear. God will again bless his people, and give them fruitfulness instead of sterility. Once again this has potentially both a physical and a symbolic meaning, and we do well to attend to both: as usual in the Old Testament, blessings are seldom 'purely spiritual', but normally have a concrete, down-to-earth dimension too.

Almighty God,
 who gave such grace to your apostle Saint Andrew
 that he readily obeyed the call of your Son Jesus Christ
 and brought his brother with him:
 call us by your holy word,
 and give us grace to follow you without delay
 and to tell the good news of your kingdom;
 through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord,
 who is alive and reigns with you,
 in the unity of the Holy Spirit,
 one God, now and for ever.

COLLECT

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