

April 14, 2019 (Palm Sunday)
St. John's College
SOLAS: Vespers--Solus Christus
"Who Is This King of Glory?"
Zechariah 9:9-17

Household Idyll

Behold
the child is conceived
in a glacial hamlet
in a sliver
strip of
land

the shanty shack clinging to the
impossibly steep slopes of the
impossibly deep
impossibly vast
impossibly cold
inland
see

the older sires
improbably named
heirs
apparent to the house
of Kootenay

urban refugees
running
barefoot
naked
from the waste

down

away
to the soles
of the foot
hills

Literary scholar Leland Ryken estimates that roughly a third of the Bible is poetry. Much more than that is what you could call poetic -- that is,

it uses figurative language, and as Ryken asserts, such passages require similar analysis. What you just heard is a poem that I wrote this week, and I chose to begin today's sermon in this rather cryptic way to illustrate some of the difficulties of interpreting poetry, and hence of biblical prophecy, which is by and large in the form of poetry, and which, even when it isn't, always uses metaphor and other forms of figurative language.

Like the poem I just read, some of you may find the prophetic voice so disorienting that you find it hard not to tune out right away. Yet we can be sure that there is no word of biblical poetry, or biblical prophecy, no word anywhere in the Bible in fact that was not carefully chosen.

In my poem I used very specific words to express a reality that I feel most keenly. In fact, I chose each one with even more care than I normally would. I hope that most of you will have picked up on some of the emotional content, the sense of nostalgia, of longing, that it expresses. Some will have perceived subtle biblical allusions, others will recognize an alpine setting, for others aspects of the syntax will feel familiar. Some words are less common and so render the overall meaning somewhat more opaque, and this is complicated by the fact that many of the words, even those that are well-known, have multiple meanings or are homonyms. If you don't know me personally you can get to know something of my personality by

familiarizing yourself with my work. But only those who seek to know me well, my family and close friends, will truly understand me, will care about the situation the poem describes and how it makes me feel, and may even become personally invested in it. Even then, they will likely find it somewhat foreign, because it describes something that they have never experienced and can never experience because it exists in my mind -- it is a construct cobbled together from the reminiscences of those the poem vaguely references.

Yet still I maintain that the poem is meaningful. And not only that, against prevailing literary prejudices, I as the poet assert that its range of meaning is limited: and not by you, (the listener's) imagination, but by my

(the poet's) intentional points of reference.

The same is true of biblical prophecy. Most who commit themselves to reading it will immediately be struck by the emotional content: exaltation, grief, wistfulness, anger, or what you. If you're a student of Scripture, you will also perceive familiar phrases or syntax, echoes of other Bible passages. If you know something of Ancient Near Eastern history and geography, you'll have a better understanding of those kinds of references. Only those who study ancient languages will begin to appreciate the linguistic beauty and subtleties of uncommon words, homonyms and the like. Those who study the work will begin to become familiar with the preoccupations of

the prophet. But only those who seek to intimately know the Author behind the prophecy will ever begin to understand him, will care deeply about the situation that he describes to the point that they invest themselves, everything they are, in his perspective, his purposes, in short, in HIM.

And just as I insist that despite the difficulties it presents my poem has a range of meaning that is limited by my intentions, likewise the meaning of biblical prophecy is not whatever we want to make of it, but is rather suggested by the terms of reference that its Author has made available to us.

We don't talk much about biblical prophecy anymore. There have been seasons where it seemed to be all

anyone could talk about in the church. Every oracle was obsessively mined and sifted to try and discover exactly what God's plan for the final act of the human drama would look like and when it would all take place, followed by overconfident pronouncements based on supposedly sound biblical schemes. On the other hand, there are those who are enamoured by the elevated language of the prophets, yet manipulate it to mean whatever they want it to mean to conform to what they have convinced themselves are their lofty ends.

But nowadays many Christians simply ignore the prophets, finding the poetry too confusing and the imagery too outlandish to be relevant. Most far prefer the more

tangible Gospel stories, or the didactic clarity of Paul. But by volume prophecy comprises one of the largest single genres in the Bible, so if you want to be a person who can claim to take the Bible seriously you have to learn how to grapple with these mysterious texts.

The first thing we need to recognize is that the primary purpose of biblical prophecy is not to give us specific information about the future. That is, God never intended for us to be able to use what he has revealed to predict with any degree of precision how he is going to effect his plans on the earth. There are simply too many details that he leaves out. In fact, when he spoke of the end of all things, Jesus insisted that no one, not the angels, not even he himself, was

privy to the Father's blueprint (Matt 24:36).

By the same token, biblical prophecy was not given as a canvas on which to paint our own motifs. This is an equally serious presumption. In other words, while most biblical prophecy is poetic and most poetry employs liberal amounts of metaphorical language, the prophetic use of metaphor is not a license to infuse your favourite prophecy with your preferred meaning. To do that is to seriously abuse the text.

No, in order to take the text seriously we have to wrestle with the language, we have to take it on its own terms, we have to seek to understand the context in which it was given, we have to be humble enough to admit when we fail to understand, and we

have to be courageous enough not to pretend to misunderstand when its meaning is all too clear.

The biblical prophets had one main *message*. What is the message? That God is in control.

That main message serves two main *functions*. Those functions are:

1. to *encourage* the humble, and
2. to *warn* the arrogant

That is, God is IN CONTROL--and this is a comforting fact to those who embrace his rule. On the other hand, GOD is in control--and that is a dreadful prospect to those who seek to put themselves in his place.

God is in control, say the prophets. He is sovereign over all creation, over every aspect of our lives. So be

encouraged, you who are oppressed, you who are sick and sorrowful, you who are struggling to believe.

God is in control, say the prophets. No amount of strength or wealth or cleverness or ambition will amount to anything without his say so. So be warned, you who believe you are the masters of your own fate, you who've managed to convince yourselves that you've earned your success.

The second thing we must always bear in mind when reading this literature is that Hebrew prophets had a *method*. They operated within a tradition. Each of the prophets were uniquely called by God but they were also keenly aware of the prophets that had come before them, going back to Moses, the servant of God, who defined the prophetic role, and

even further back to Abraham, the friend of God and to his grandson Jacob, renamed Israel, the one who wrestled with God.

Prophets self-consciously operated within that tradition. Sometimes we are told that a prophet received a vision, but for the most part we are not privy to the ways that God revealed his Word to them. What *is* clear that they were not merely taking dictation. They constantly referred to the earlier tradition and drew upon it though they clearly felt a great deal of freedom in doing so. They structured their written oracles along the lines laid out by previous generations so that by overlaying their contribution succeeding generations of readers could perceive

God's perspective with increasing richness and clarity.

If we bear this framework in mind -- if we embrace the overarching prophetic *message* that "God is in control", and employ the prophetic *method* that always looks to what has already been revealed -- the biblical prophets will start to make more sense. We will also begin to see how their predictions, while often demonstrably fulfilled in history, find reference points in each successive generation, including our own. Not only this, we will see that they all find their ultimate fulfillment in the person and work of Jesus Christ. As Paul insists in 2 Corinthians: "all the promises of God find their 'Yes' in him". (2 Cor 1:20).

This is all in my mind not only because of the Scripture we are looking at today, but because of a massive project that I plan to embark on at our next Vespers service. Over the last number of months, I believe that God has put it in my heart to devote myself to preaching through the book of Isaiah. And I feel a great deal of trepidation in announcing this because I did not seek this assignment, and I know that I am unequal to such a task. But, as God recently reminded me via the words of one my new favourite poets -- who I spoke about during our last evening together -- William Cowper: "The only true happiness comes from squandering ourselves for a purpose."

The passage from Zechariah that we are studying today is late from the

standpoint of Old Testament prophecy: roughly 200 years after Isaiah, 500 years on from King David, 1000 years from Moses, and possibly 1500 years after Abraham and his sons. Many prophecies had been given and fulfilled in that time. The prophecies of destruction for Israel's rebellion first revealed through Moses but reiterated by Jeremiah and many others had come to pass.

After Nebuchadnezzar's sack of Jerusalem and 70 years spent in Babylon, a small band of exiles was allowed to return by the Persian emperor Cyrus, to rebuild its temple. The holy city, once the dwelling place of God, lay in a heap of smoldering ruins. But God was not finished with his people, and he was not finished with prophecy. He raised up a new

generation of prophets to encourage the despairing and to warn the clever.

Read Zechariah 9 excerpt

As I said, Zechariah stands near the end of the prophetic tradition. In true prophetic fashion, he implicitly warns and encourages with the message that despite what they have suffered over the past century, God is still in control. How does he do this?

First, he echoes his immediate prophetic forebears like Zephaniah and Isaiah, who insisted that God, and the longed for king, God's man, would ultimately return to Zion. He also picks up on a thought from a very early prophecy: Jacob's deathbed blessing of his son Judah, which I have printed in part on the front page next to the passage from

Zechariah (Gen 49:10-11). He reintroduces Jacob's motif of the donkey's colt, the purebred royal steed united to the vine, a metaphor frequently applied in Scripture to God's chosen people.

Not only this, he reminds the people that the terms of God's covenants with Abraham and Moses and David were still in effect, and that God always keeps up his end. His prophecy reverberates with the voice of every prophet since Moses: the voice of God encouraging his covenant people to return, to turn their hearts back to him, even as he has returned to Zion, his stronghold.

Along with reconciliation he promises freedom and security and significance: God will release them from their arid prison and bring

peace, breaking the bow of hostility even as he reunites the tribes of Israel as his own appointed weaponry: his bowstring stretched taut, his blade poised to flash and strike. Thus this true king of Israel will do more than merely return: he will speak peace to the nations, his quiver emptying as Zion's sons fly aloft to the ends of the earth, soaring on his Word.

"Who is this king of glory?" the psalmist once asked. Zechariah describes him: he is "righteous", he "has salvation", he is "humble".

So we read in Matthew of Jesus, standing on the Mount of Olives, looking away to the west, to Mount Zion, to the fulfillment of ancient prophecy, deputizing two confused disciples to collect a donkey and her colt, "Don't worry if they question

what you're up to," he says, "Tell them, 'The Lord needs them.' They'll know it's for me." They untie them and bring them to him. He sits on them, showing that Jacob spoke truer than he possibly could have known: he "binds the foal to the vine, the donkey's colt to the choice vine", the old designation for Israel that Jesus would now adopt for himself: "I am the *true* vine..." he would tell his disciples in just a few days. And before the week is out, they will be haunted by another echo of Jacob's words, the "garments" of Judah's heir will be "washed" in the "blood of grapes". Grapes are of course the fruit of the vine, their blood the blood of Christ.

Was his riding on a donkey a hackneyed, desperate stunt? Was it

like popping on the crown jewels and perversely expecting everyone to fall on their faces? No. Unlike most who aspire to power, even as he went about fulfilling prophecy after messianic prophecy Jesus had always left people guessing, steadfastly resisting the mantle of kingship for the three years that he was in the public eye. This ride was the long awaited signal, a self-conscious self-identification, a final, reluctant unveiling, of what many had already suspected: “Yes, I am the heir of Judah, the son of David, the true king.”

Well...so what? What does Zion's king have to do with us?

Let's answer that question by looking with a broader lens at our Scripture passage. The oracle that I have cited

is only the second half of the whole thing. The first verse of Zechariah 9 reads:

The oracle of the word of the Lord is against the land of Hadrach and Damascus is its resting place.

(that is, Israel's Gentile neighbours to the northeast)

For the Lord has an eye on mankind and on all the tribes of Israel...

So God's eye is not only directed toward Israel, he has every people group of the world in his sights including Israel's enemies, as is plain from the rest of the chapter. His eye roves counterclockwise moving from the Syrians west to the savvy seafaring traders of Tyre and Sidon, and on south to Israel's ancient enemies the Philistines, whom he

surprisingly promises to include as a “remnant” for himself, ultimately -- in what would have been an unwelcome shock to Zechariah’s contemporaries -- absorbing them as “a clan in Judah”. Finally, in the passage I’ve printed for you, he includes in his purview Greece beyond the western borders of the Persian Empire, for Zechariah a place at the fringes of the world and a people who were at war with Persia, which was an empire that had treated his people comparatively well.

Thus it is no accident that in John’s Gospel we read of some Greeks coming to see Jesus immediately after his triumphal entry to the city, immediately after John links Jesus’ approach to Zechariah’s prophecy, immediately after the Pharisees

complain to one another that the “*whole world* has gone after him”. John treats this episode with Greeks in an unusual way. Other than the fact that they wanted to see Jesus, John -- who always arranges his material very carefully -- tells us next to nothing about these foreigners, yet he tells us specifically that they approached Jesus’ disciple Philip, and he takes the time to remind us that Philip was from Bethsaida in Galilee (something we already knew because he spent the whole second chapter relating how Jesus met his first disciples). He then tells us that Philip related the request to his hometown pal Andrew, and that they both went together to speak to Jesus about it, possibly, as Mark relates, as he was visiting the temple that day. But what

John doesn't tell us, however, is what Jesus and these inquiring Greeks spoke about, or even that Jesus actually spoke with them at all!

Is John pulling our leg -- just telling us a shaggy dog story? That seems unlikely. He is not so subtly telling us that what Jesus said to the Greeks is not the point. The point is that the news about Jesus -- Zion's king -- had reached the "sons of Greece" just as Zechariah foretold, a mere foretaste of what was coming: the lightning bolt of the Gospel to the entire Greek speaking world and beyond by the time John was writing his Gospel at the end of the 1st century (Zech 9:14). Again, we know nothing of what was said to these Greeks but John includes it to show that the simple fact of their seeking Jesus -- from

Bethlehem in Judah, and Judah's rightful heir -- through Philip and Andrew -- hailing from Galilee, from the territory historically belonging to the northern tribes collectively referred to as Ephraim -- was the moment that prompted this teaching from Jesus, a teaching about what glory, true glory, will look like. Jesus was fully aware that the words of all the prophets, particularly Zechariah's, were at that moment being accomplished. And he insists that his glory was to come through his death. He throws off the cloak of secrecy and dons his crown only to disappoint those who had missed the point that he was making through prophets like Zechariah: "Rejoice, humble daughter Zion; take heed, ends of the earth! Through the blood of my covenant,

my own blood, I will set you free from your parched prison, the broken cistern of sin! Only if a grain of wheat dies does it bears much fruit: the grain that will make you flourish; only by crushing the fruit of the vine will the new wine flow: the new wine of my Spirit.”

Zechariah was never talking about a worldwide Israeli empire with Jerusalem as its capital. Zion has always been more than a mere place. Zion transcends material reality. Zion is the called people of God, his very own household, the commonwealth of Israel comprised of Jews *and* Gentiles, a temple in which each of us is living stone, priest, and sacrifice. Zion is the Body of Christ, the heavenly Jerusalem, his bride, the

church. (Eph 2:12,19-22; 1 Pet 2:5; Rom 12:1; Heb 12:22; Rev 21:

So when Jesus says:

Now is the judgment of this world; now will the ruler of this world be cast out...

he adopts Zechariah’s violent imagery but makes it clear that his intention was never the grinding of Gentile people groups under a Judean despot. He makes it clear that the enemy is not the Romans or the Greeks or the Philistines, or anyone else.

The enemy is not Caesar or Herod (nor for that matter is it Trump or Trudeau!) but it is the “ruler of this world”: the same adversary who has always been determined to destroy God’s creation, the one who has been

deceiving all people everywhere since the Garden of Eden, the one whose universal rebellion God's peculiar plan -- through this peculiar man born to this peculiar nation -- will now overthrow to make for himself a peculiar people!

Yet it's obvious that Zechariah's prophecy is not completely fulfilled: for all that Jesus accomplished, peace has not yet come to Jerusalem. The people waving their palm branches and throwing their cloaks down to the road witnessed their King crucified, just as he foretold. Yet he rose again, and his disciples watched him ascend: he remains exalted, seated at the right hand of the Father.

Once again we wait for his return. But now we wait with the knowledge that

the king is already resident in Zion. We are in him, and he lives in us. In Zechariah's day he encouraged the heir of Judah to lay a foundation and build a new temple. So Christ is the Cornerstone and we are the living stones, the temple of his Spirit. In Zechariah's day he encouraged Joshua to take up his priestly mantle. So Yeshua, Jesus the Messiah, presides as the Great High Priest and calls each of us to be his royal priesthood. In Zechariah's day the foundation of the temple was laid and a sacrifice was once again offered on the altar. So Christ became the perfect sacrifice to atone for our sins, and we must lay down our own lives for him. We who are the servants of Christ are the temple of the living God, and the Spirit of Christ has taken

up residence in us. We are, to use Zechariah's language, those "sons of Greece" who have become the "sons of Zion", or in Jesus' words, sons of light (John 12:36).

Zechariah and his contemporaries eked out a meagre existence in the burnt out shell of a once great city. We too face challenges: as individuals, as the Church, as a society. We are often tempted to despair. But regardless of circumstances, we are to live joyfully. We are to "Rejoice!", filled with the grain and new wine of his Spirit, knowing that our King has come and will come again. He calls us continually: return to the stronghold, to Zion, to the fellowship of the Church, to the study of his Word and the practice of prayer, to repentance

and restoration, to be transformed into his likeness: the King who has salvation. We are saved to be like him, the "flock of his people": righteous and humble, sparkling "jewels" in his crown, (v. 16).

Zechariah and his contemporaries faced fierce opposition. The temptation was strong to simply go along to get along, despairing of ever accomplishing any of the tasks that had been set for them. We are to live purposefully, as sons of Zion, as bolts out of the blue, as blinding blades wielded by our King to speak peace to the nations, continuing the work of building the temple of the Spirit.

Zechariah and his contemporaries faced a monumental task, what could have seemed an absurd task, and while Zechariah renewed their hopes

of a coming king, the current reality was that they were subjects of a Persian emperor living among people who did not want them there. Their king was nowhere in sight. They were likely tempted to think of him as a figment of their imagination, a happy dream, an aspiration goal that they could exploit to inspire the work, all while trusting in their own ingenuity to get the task accomplished by whatever means were at hand. We all face that temptation. But we are to live expectantly, knowing that our King is no phantom hope, that he is indeed resident in Zion, in us individually and in us corporately as the Church. We are to live our lives -- make our daily decisions -- based on *that* reality. Given that this reality is not visible such a life, such decisions,

will inevitably make little sense to those around us.

But our King has arrived. He is here. And he is not just “humble, riding on a donkey”. For to understand the prophecies stretching back to Zechariah and Jacob and beyond we must overlay others as well. John himself revealed the final vision in the book of Revelation: Christ the King, Faithful and True, will come again for all to see, no longer seated on a donkey but on a great white war horse, no longer speaking peace to the nations, but striking them down, the very Word of God, a sharp sword judging and making war, his eyes a flame of fire, his robe dipped in blood, no longer crushed but crushing, himself treading the winepress of God’s wrath as King of kings and Lord

of lords (Rev 19:11-16). We are to live our lives both in joyful expectation and holy fear.

For this is the meaning of Solus Christus:

Christ alone is the King of the Universe. There is no other.

In Christ alone we receive the grace alone that saves us, for Christ alone is the one who “has salvation” on offer, who has won us from our ancient Adversary, allowing us to escape his fate.

In Christ alone we are given the faith alone that allows us hear him, to know him in Scripture alone.

In Christ alone we are never alone. He joins us to himself by giving us his Spirit. We are his Body, the Church.

In Christ alone, by grace alone, through faith alone, according to Scripture alone, can we live to the glory of God alone.

Rejoice, daughter Zion! He shall reign forever and ever.