

March 15, 2020
SOLAS:Vespers
St. John's College
The City Faithful
Isaiah 1:21-31

SERMON I: THE CITY FATEFUL

It may be hard to believe in these days when so many worship the raw will to power, but in many ages and civilizations the personal integrity of those who govern has been non-negotiable. Regardless of undisclosed personal failings, leaders and those associated with them have been expected to

model and enforce an elevated ethic, the collective moral standards of a given society—some explicit, others tacitly understood. Our leadership manifests our aspirations. By definition, leaders lead: they are not merely functionaries managing our interests—they show us what's possible, they tend our dreams.

The factors which cultivate those dreams are varied. In European (and post-European) societies, pagan tribal culture provided the rich soil of our most deeply rooted

assumptions, Roman civilization husbanded and Greek philosophy irrigated our most stable institutional structures, and the Bible furnished, animated, warmed, and fed our most fertile metaphors. For the most part, this has been a healthy and fruitful synthesis. European models, with their promotion of efficiency and democratic ideals, have been nearly universally adopted around the world.

One of the models, or institutional metaphors, that the Bible describes in particularly striking

terms is that of the city.

Introduced almost immediately after the Fall, in Genesis 4, after Abel's murderous brother Cain's exile to the land of "Nod" — literally, the land of "wandering" — The City makes its first appearance. It is Cain himself who establishes the first city the Bible records. He founds a city and names it after his son — thus the landless exile asserts himself and establishes his legacy, an urban legacy which, if you connect the dots through Cain's descendants mentioned at the end of Genesis

4, is linked with sexual innovation (polygamy) and violence. Through his list of descendants Cain's city is also connected with the arts (lyre/pipe) and technology (bronze and iron), and paradoxically, with rootlessness (tents).

But it is particularly the themes of inappropriate sexual relationships and violence to which Genesis returns after it comforts the reader with the promise of redemption through Adam and Eve's third child: Seth and his descendant, Noah (ch5).

Still, after the violence is purged by means of the Flood, Genesis yet again notes a proliferation of cities, first in connection with the one it calls the world's first "mighty man": Nimrod, a descendant of Ham, the son of Noah who disgraced his father. The first city of Nimrod's "kingdom" is Babel (10:8-10), which in turn becomes the first city the Bible describes in any detail.

Babel, a pointed play on words—in Hebrew it means "confused"—is proverbially associated with

human ambition as well as the technologies human beings develop to pursue that ambition, in this case the bricks and bitumen of the fabled tower which, through God's intervention, failed to be erected and reach its potential. (ch11)

Ur and Haran are the next cities to receive a notable mention—as places *out* of which God calls Abram and his family, after which we are introduced to the notorious cities of Sodom and Gomorrah. We first encounter them as two out of nine

belligerent and warring city states, before their violence and sexual sin provoke God's most terrible judgement since the Flood.

In the midst of these conflagrations, we first hear tell of Salem, a singular city of peace governed by a mysterious king, Melchizedek, a “priest of God Most High”, a city seemingly untainted by the violent and perverting ambition of her neighbours (Gen 14). We hear nothing more of this city for a long time afterward, but eventually it becomes the place where “God

puts his name”, a place he designates as the site of his Temple, Zion, the capital of the King David’s dynasty: the unique city of God called Jerusalem.

Parry/Blake: Jerusalem

SERMON II: The City Fretful

READ: Isaiah 1

Jerusalem, Isaiah’s hometown, is the city in view at the end of the passage we just read. As we saw earlier, the Bible’s typically dim view of cities is due to their being aggregations of ambition and desire, centres of power and

pleasure that glory in their cosmopolitanism, efficiency, and rootlessness. But Jerusalem had always been intended to be something different: a place from which the humble light of truth would shine and illuminate the whole world, as we can hear in Solomon’s prayer after he completed the building of the Temple: “As for the foreigner who does not belong to your people Israel but has come from a distant land because of your name—for they will hear of your great name and your mighty hand and your

outstretched arm—when they come and pray toward this temple, then hear from heaven, your dwelling place. Do whatever the foreigner asks of you, so that all the peoples of the earth may know your name and fear you, as do your own people Israel, and may know that this house I have built bears your Name.”

Jerusalem has always been a potent symbol, so it's not overly surprising that we see in Blake's *Jerusalem* an example of European appropriation of the holy city imagery. His is an inspiring

attempt to redeem the unholy ambitions of his rapacious culture, exemplified in the “dark, Satanic mills” he laments, a blight on his beloved English countryside and culture. Blake coopts Zion to serve what he feels is a noble purpose, the “building of Jerusalem” along a peculiarly English model: “Bring me my bow of burning gold! Bring me my arrows of desire! Bring me my spear! O, clouds unfold! Bring me my Chariot of Fire! I will not cease from mental fight; nor shall my sword sleep in my hand ‘til we

have built Jerusalem in England's green and pleasant land.”

The problem with this is that it is precisely this type of ambition that Isaiah decries, the heated hubris that denatured the faithful city of Jerusalem in the first place so many years ago.

Nor has it been limited to English nationalism. All the European colonial powers, along with the United States and others, framed their national projects along similar lines. As one historian put it recently, “The 19th-century world

of imperial nationalism reverberated with claims of nations' divinely given missions.” As so-called “Christian” nations, they were all too ready to brand themselves a New Jerusalem, seeing anyone who stood in the way of their domination not only as enemies of the state, but enemies of God. Instead of shaping their dreams according to a biblical ideal, they were all too often all too willing to play fast and loose with biblical interpretation to make it seem like the Bible sanctioned their selfish

pursuits. Instead of subjecting their ambition to the Bible's bridle, they whored the Bible to gratify their ambition.

We know Isaiah as a prophet. He was also a student of history. No doubt he knew the old, Mosaic lore: of Melchizedek and his city of Salem and of nearby Mount Moriah, where God provided a ram as a substitute for Abraham's son, Isaac (Gen 22). No doubt he knew the more recent history as well, the chronicles of the Davidic prophets Samuel, Nathan, and Gad (1 Ch 29:12), the early accounts

which may be the same as the biblical books of Kings and from which our book of Chronicles surely drew. He knew of King David's retaking of Jerusalem from the gentile Jebusites (1 Ch 11:4-9), who at some point had displaced Melchizedek's mysterious people. He knew the rest of the story of the founding of Zion, David's City and his own, and of the circumstances surrounding the building of YHWH's Temple (1 Ch 21): how David recklessly sought to assess the strength of his kingdom despite his earlier

reliance on the LORD of Hosts/YHWH of Armies; how through the repentance of the king and Jerusalem's elders the people of the city narrowly escaped destruction by the angel of the LORD—the disease that God had sent to waste David's kingdom; how at the angel's command he built an altar just north of the city walls on Mount Moriah; how he sacrificed on that altar and called on the name of YHWH; how YHWH answered him with fire from heaven. He knew how David thus finally learned to

trust completely in God. He knew the ways of God—the *mishpat* and *tsedek*, justice and righteousness—to which David aspired, the godly dreams David carried and inspired in others.

No doubt everyone else in Jerusalem also knew this complex history, but Isaiah was a professional historian: his city and the iron-fisted Uzziah who sat on the throne in his youth were his professional subjects (2 Ch 26). He knew both Uzziah's inspiring ambition and his tragic presumption. He observed his

tendency to trust his political instincts, his army, his fortifications and his technological innovations. But as the Chronicler writes: “...when [Uzziah] was strong, he grew proud, to his destruction.” Thus, Isaiah witnessed Uzziah’s egotistical overreach—his attempt to consolidate his power by usurping the priesthood—and his punishment by God with the same kind of scaly skin disease with which Moses’ sister Miriam was afflicted for similar self-importance (Nu 12).

Isaiah also had a ringside seat for the imported abominations which Uzziah’s grandson, Ahaz, adopted (and upon which Ahaz’s grandson, Manasseh—the malevolent perpetrator of Isaiah’s ugly fate—expanded). Instead of trusting in God’s ways, the justice and righteousness that David prized so highly, Ahaz brought in his innovations in the process of seeking the protection of the powerful Assyrian Empire: the building of a pagan altar in the Temple, the sacrificing of one of his own sons. Even Ahaz’s

successor, the good king Hezekiah, similarly curried favour with that ancient upstart Babel, now in its latest incarnation: Babylon, as a little insurance in case God didn't live up to his end of the bargain.

Uzziah, his descendants, and many other families of the Jerusalem nobility presumed upon God's commitment to Jerusalem, molded the city into their own image, attempting to coopt her assumed invincibility as a means to satisfy their own ambitions. And it seems the people largely followed their lead. In so doing, Isaiah says, in

pimping out the daughter of Zion with baubles and battlements, in lending her beauty and strength to the highest bidder instead of trusting their God to keep his promises, they made her into a high priced call girl: rich, beautiful, even successful (seemingly)—for a season. For all her gleaming glory, she had become a city like any other, a city with city-sized problems.

Isaiah speaks of “silver” turning to “dross”, of “best wine” being cut with water. These are the leaders of Jerusalem, as becomes obvious

in the next verse, as Isaiah reveals the dross to be rebel princes who scorn the wisdom of their faithful fathers, who cavort with king pins, who laugh at the frailty of the weak and vulnerable if they even notice it.

Isaiah is saying that the faithful city faithful becomes a whore when the ruling class loses faith, when abandon justice and righteousness, and trust their own cunning, and murderous cruelty to grease the gears of power.

“As the king goes, so go the people.” We see it still: lacking faithful leaders, we lose faith ourselves. The city faithful become the city fretful, subject to cults of personality, slaves to our own petty ambition and greed. Like a rotten, punky oak we are impotent: withered, weak, useless; like a scorched and dessicated garden we are sterile: infertile, unfruitful, barren, an ever increasing investment and a spiral of diminishing returns.

Hindemith: Trauermusik

Psalm 50: stanzas 1, 4, 9-11

SERMON III: The City Frightful

The ancient lizard king has died.
The new king looks more or less
like the old—minus the scaly
skin—and the crown prince pouts
and fritters away his time with
ne'er-do-wells and hoodlums
while a far off and vicious Empire
ravages the known world and their
kinsmen to the north rattle their
sabres, threatening to invade if
Zion doesn't fall in line with their
rebel alliance.

Into this time, Isaiah speaks an
eternal word. Eternal, because not
only is it pointedly addressed to
Ahaz and his cronies, its truth
deepens down the ages. What was
a defeating challenge to Ahaz was
profitable to Hezekiah, and would
have been to Manasseh his son,
had he bothered to listen prior to
his manacled change of heart in a
distant, dank imperial dungeon—
as it turned out too little, too late
to turn back the fate of Jerusalem.
It was a profitable word to the
returning Hebrew exiles a century
and more afterward, who had

lived through the horror that Isaiah predicted and were trying to pick up the pieces despite the disillusionment of the shattering of the House of David, the shattering of the supposedly eternal promises God had made to him.

Still, they had Isaiah's faint, seemingly impossible word of restoration. They had a whisper of a hope of wholeness. But the promised disintegration, the near annihilation, had happened.

The terrific titles we see here, an unparalleled piling on: "the Lord,

the LORD of Hosts, The Mighty One of Israel", rear up like a tsunami, like the Red Sea towering in a heap before crashing down on Israel's Egyptian oppressors, but now rise ominously over the princes of YHWH's chosen people—those he calls his own inheritance, the sons of David, the man after his own heart. These are the "enemies" from whom the commander of the Heavenly Armies will extract his relief, these are the "foes" whose misdeeds must be avenged. And we sense the note of regret in YHWH's "Ah!"

or in Hebrew: “HO!”, the exclamation of pain and reproach which we saw early in the chapter; the regret present in the “turning” of the Mighty One’s hand— “turning”, *shuv*, being the same Hebrew root that we will see twice more in the verbs “to restore” and “to repent”. “I will turn...I will turn my hand against...against YOU, my beloved Zion...all that you count as wealth and strength will be fuel for the fire, as flaxen husks that go up in an instant. All the things you care about most, your life’s work, will be the very things to set you

ablaze. Your silvery slag I will smelt with lye, the smoldering product of your own ashes, to refine and remove the chemical compromise with the boiling heat of reaction.”

Bach: Double Concerto (III)

SERMON IV: The City Faithful

As I said earlier, Isaiah’s was a word for his time that has deepened down the ages. For Jerusalem was indeed destroyed by fire a century after Isaiah died. The Davidic princes were indeed removed, and Jerusalem was indeed somewhat restored under

the supervision of counsellors and judges. But the full scope of the prophecy was longer in coming. Jerusalem did not return to her former glory, and the non-Davidic rulers like Herod who ultimately made an effort to force it to happen looked more like Uzziah (really, more like Ahaz or Manasseh) than David. And soon thereafter, the city was once again burned to the ground by the Romans.

This is how biblical prophecy works. The patterns repeat and proliferate. They may find their

truest expression in one event or another, but the patterns never end. Yes, Isaiah's word of wrath was horrifically vindicated by the Babylonian Empire, yet it was underlined even more emphatically in Jerusalem's destruction some 70 years after Christ's birth. And that time it took almost 2000 years for Israel to return to the land.

But what of the promise about "The City of Righteousness"? What of "The Faithful City"? What of "those in her who repent"? Will

“Zion be redeemed by justice and righteousness” as Isaiah said?

To answer this we have to remind ourselves once again of the biblical meaning of these twin concepts, justice and righteousness. As I was at pains to point out in my sermon last November, “justice” in the biblical sense (*mishpat*) concerns far more than redressing inequity. I will crib a little of my previous message and quote two authors, John Oswalt and Alec Motyer, both Isaiah scholars. Oswalt tells us that *mishpat*/justice is “the creation order, both physically and

spiritually.” (523) Motyer puts it this way: “*mishpat* is used...to express the sum

total of what the Lord has adjudged to be right, in a word, [*mishpat* is] the will of God.”

Likewise “righteousness” (or *tsedek*) is the principle upon which *mishpat* is based. Oswalt quotes an older Isaiah scholar John Skinner: “*Tsedek*, ‘righteousness,’ denotes ‘the principle of right action, whereas *mishpat*, “justice,” is the embodiment of that principle.” (Oswalt, 105) As

Motyer again puts it:
“righteousness embodies [God’s] holiness in sound principles, and justice is the expression of righteousness.” (49)

We can now see how these two ideas go hand in hand: immoral actions (the opposite of *mishpat*/justice) are symptomatic of a hollowed out conviction. Put the other way round: a lack of principle (a lack of *tsedek*/righteousness) inevitably leads to the indulgence of our pragmatic instinct for self-preservation.

Thus the faithful city is one that was full of *mishpat*: good deeds, selfless concern, a fair and equitable society. *Tsedek*, righteousness, the principles underlying right action “lodged in her” —they were the basis of her self-understanding, her reason for being. But now she has become a me-first, conniving pragmatist just like every other city you’ve ever heard of. “Murderers,” have taken up residence; she indulges her grasping, cut-throat, animal instincts. She has become a place of fretfulness, a city ruled by fear.

How does Isaiah return from this sorry state to “The Faithful City”? Justice. Justice himself, justice personified, will redeem her based on *his* righteousness: “Zion will be redeemed by justice, and those in her who repent, by righteousness.”

And it is precisely this redemption that Isaiah reveals in the chapter that explains the whole book, chapter 53, the moment in which the Suffering Servant is “crushed” and “broken” in the place of “rebels and sinners” (1:28; cf

53:10). The “soul” of the Servant, we are told, “makes an offering for [our] guilt”. The *tsaddik*, the “righteous one, [the LORD’s] servant,” shall “make many to be accounted righteous” (*tsaddik*) (53:11)

Living according to God’s *tsedek* and walking in *mishpat*, satisfying the justice of God in righteousness, the Suffering Servant, Jesus, like Isaac’s ram on nearby Mount Moriah, redeemed by his sacrifice “all those [in Zion] who repent”.

And thus we see the restoration set in motion, and we see a hint already that Jerusalem—Zion—will become something more than a point on a map. I referenced earlier Isaiah’s image of the smelting of silver with lye. Lye is indeed used in metallurgy, where it is added to dissolved silver chloride to turn it into pure silver. The chemical reaction boils as it generates a great deal of heat. A new material is formed, a new state is achieved through this unpleasant burning process: “alloy is removed”, purity is restored.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=mqYVOT-WybE>

Zion has become something more than it was. It now encompasses the people of God who come to David’s son, the eternal king of Zion, Jesus Christ. As the chapter following the prophecy of the Suffering Servant puts it: “Sing, O barren one, [...] Enlarge the place of your tent, and let the curtains of your habitations be stretched out; do not hold back; lengthen your cords and strengthen your stakes. For you will spread abroad to the right and to the left, and your

offspring will possess the nations
and will people the desolate cities.
[...]

O afflicted one, storm-tossed and
not comforted, behold, I will set
your stones in antimony, and lay
your foundations with sapphires. I
will make your pinnacles of agate,
your gates of carbuncles, and all
your wall of precious stones. All
your children shall be taught by
the LORD, and great shall be the
peace of your children. In
righteousness you shall be
established...” (54:1-3,11-14)

And again, in the final chapter of
the book (ch66), the see
heartening vision of the daughter
of Zion redeemed and restored
with surrounded by her children
from every parentage:

“Rejoice with Jerusalem, and be
glad for her, all you who love her;
rejoice with her in joy, all you who
mourn over her; that you may
nurse and be satisfied from her
consoling breast; that you may
drink deeply with delight from her
glorious abundance.”

For thus says the LORD: “Behold, I will extend peace to her like a river, and the glory of the nations like an overflowing stream; and you shall nurse, you shall be carried upon her hip, and bounced upon her knees.” (66:10-12)

Isaiah’s was a word for his time that has deepened down the ages. It is profitable in our age, as well:

We who like to think of ourselves as enlightened progressives are in fact the spiritual heirs of the Romantic nationalists and their theologically liberal allies who

made such a mess of the late 19th and early 20th centuries. Spiritually adulterous as well as culturally idolatrous, like Blake our spiritual fathers camouflaged their chauvinism in Zion’s ancient glow, even as they simulated a sincere interest in the downtrodden. We, the scientophilic rebel princes, companions of quacks, founded residential schools and pushed eugenics (among other nasty things), and we continue to shame anyone who doesn’t conform to our perverse, covertly Euro-centric and aristocratic bias. One day, we

will be “ashamed of the oaks that we have desired”, and “blush for the gardens we have chosen,” for our project is inherently “an oak whose leaf withers”, “a garden without water.”

On the other hand, we who are proud conservatives are the keepers of the blue flame of a rarefied separatism that has far too often turned its back on the oppressed, only rarely “bringing justice to the fatherless”, and largely ignoring “the widow’s cause”. We may not be rebels, but we tend to love the kind of bribery

paid in the currency of such things as Supreme Court seats and blind support for the modern state of Israel. Thus compromised, we chase along the way after the fleeting gifts of our privilege.

I have been a believer of both progressive and conservative persuasions. I have been an unbeliever as well—long enough to discover that when I indulged a vague or nonexistent metaphysics, I was behaving in a way that was ultimately far more damaging—far more complacent, far more complicit in maintaining the unjust

status quo than I allowed myself to imagine.

Ironically, given my vocation, the one thing I have never been is the rube who believes that “beauty will save the world”. This misquotation of Dostoevsky sounds very nice, in a naïve sort of way. To put the idea in more prosaic terms: the arts stimulate moral uplift. Those who subscribe to this belief include many colleagues and luminaries who should know better: Beethoven, for example, was a firm believer in this principle. But despite the

lovely sentiment, it is a lie on its face. As an artist of some repute myself, I know all too well the selfishness that manifests itself in me especially in moments of supposed artistic purity, so I have known that this philosophy is a lie my entire life. And the number of moral monsters who have been connoisseurs or even accomplished artists themselves confirms this.

A faithful and fulsome reading of Isaiah forces us to confront the sobering truth, and Christian people of every persuasion need

hear this regularly: if we will not *harness our ambition* to the Word of God, we will harness the Word of God to our ambition, and we will destroy ourselves and our churches in the process, turning glorious Zion into a bumbling Babel. *We* do not “build Jerusalem”. And no earth bound nation can lay claim to Zion. Redeemed by the justice and righteousness of Zion’s king, we are “looking forward to the city that has foundations whose designer and builder is God” (Heb

11:10); redeemed, we are Jerusalem, the City Faithful.

“Your eyes will behold the king in his beauty; they will see a land that stretches afar. [...]

“Your eyes will see Jerusalem...”
(33:17,20)