Sermon for 2nd of Christmas Year A

Readings: Jeremiah 31:7-14; Ephesians 1:3-14; John 1:1-18

i

Jeremiah who is famous for his gloomy predictions of impending horror takes us by surprise in today’s reading by having some Good News to share. Although, some scholars suggest that the style is more reminiscent of Isaiah of Babylon and written to fit Isaiah’s situation rather than Jeremiah’s.

If it is from Jeremiah, the situation facing him is that the Northern kingdom of Israel, symbolised by the name Ephraim, one of the chief northern tribes, has been scattered to the winds by the Assyrian invasion of 722BC, a century or so before Jeremiah’s day.

However, Judah in which Jeremiah lived was faced with imminent catastrophe at the hands of the Babylonians. The citizens of Jerusalem are now about to be scattered to the four winds.

If Isaiah of Babylon is in fact the source of these oracles, they fit the situation he was facing at the end of the Exile in Babylon when they knew that their new Persian overlord, Cyrus, was happy to see them return to Judah where he would continue to keep a close eye on them. The word, “redeemed” is Isaiah’s favourite word for describing their release from Babylon, but all this speculative dating of the passage does not alter its meaning.

We have here oracles of return and redemption. The disaster has struck already in the north, and if by Jeremiah’s hand, disaster is about to strike in the south too. But after the years of punishment, God will gather his children once again and lead them home.

The captives will return rejoicing greatly at God’s wonderful grace; there will be grain for new bread, new wine and new oil for blessing. The Christian symbolism we can see in this passage is not lost on us.

The oracles continue by evoking poetic images of a dancing girl, a flourishing garden and even the often maligned priests will receive abundant blessings in this future dispensation of grace.

This reading ends with verse 14, but if we go on we find that it is followed immediately by the passage we associate with Holy Innocents Day on 28 December and the slaughter of the Innocents in Bethlehem:

A voice is heard in Ramah, mourning and great weeping, Rachel, weeping for her children and refusing to be comforted, because her children are no more.

So the Good News from Jeremiah gives way to the more familiar oracles of doom. “Ramah” may simply mean a high place or hill, or perhaps it is being used as it is in Jeremiah 40:1 to refer to a specific place where Jews were gathered to be escorted to Babylon. Either way, it’s a bit grim. Pictures of Jews awaiting deportation under the Nazis or streams of bedraggled migrants spring to mind.

Yet Jeremiah is full of Good News today and assures the people that one day “the children will return from the land of their enemy”. Ephraim too, moaning in shame over their past sins which resulted in their disintegration as a nation, shall also be the beneficiaries of God’s great compassion (verse 20).

If we read yet further this passage leads on to the most famous section of all, the promise of the new covenant in verse 31.

ii

Ephesians 1:3-14 suggests the fulfilment of such dreams of return and redemption did not actually take place in either Jeremiah’s or Isaiah’s day, not even when the people returned home from Babylon. Now true redemption has come through the blood of Christ, which is the richness of God’s grace which he has lavished upon us.

We read that God has blessed us “in the heavenly realms” which may sound a peculiar thing to say when we are down here on earth. The force of that phrase is to suggest the act of blessing is something that exists beyond this world, in the realm of eternity. Our redemption must be seen as part of God’s eternal plan which encompasses the past of Israel’s servanthood, but now has been revealed to embrace the Christian witness and the eventual cosmic fulfilment in Christ who will bring all things together, in heaven and on earth, who is the head of all things.

In the sense that Christ constitutes God’s secret plan (Eph 3:9), recently revealed to the world, it has been pre-ordained that those who respond in faith will be treated as if they are blameless and holy in his sight, and become God’s children. This is the mystery of the gospel which has now been proclaimed to the world.

Several more times, the phrase “in the heavenly realms” is used in the *Letter* to denote realities that are free from the contamination of this world and immune from worldly upheavals and calamities. So the resurrected Christ is safely and securely “in heavenly places” (Eph 1:20); the commission of the Church to proclaim these truths to powers and principalities is also established “in the heavenly places” (Eph 3:10); it is “in the [decisive] heavenly realms” that the powers of evil forces are being defeated (Eph 6:12); and it is “in the heavenly realms” that we are raised up and seated with Christ in Ephesians 2:6. The use of the past tense, raised up and seated, suggests that our future salvation has been already guaranteed through our faith; neither the world, nor the devil can snatch us from God’s hand.

iii

In his turn, John the Evangelist overwhelms us with poetic grandeur to assert the eternal spiritual truths which we have just found in the Ephesians passage.

The other gospel writers start with a very earthly story about the birth of a baby, even if they preface that story with a genealogy: In Matthew’s case from Abraham to Jesus (Matt 1:1-17) and in Luke’s case from Jesus back to Adam (Luke 3:23-38). Mark starts his account with John the Baptist. But they all place Jesus within the context of human history. John gives us the ultimate, eternal, cosmic setting.

For John, the story of Christmas which is the opening chapter of Jesus’ earthly life, does not start with Abraham or even with Adam, but with God, “in the beginning” before anything was made. The redemption principle that God himself would save the people from their sins is woven into the fabric of the universe. Jesus Christ is the truth of God’s loving, redemptive plan and always was so. It is just that we have waited until the right time for God’s plan to be revealed.

Jesus’ birth, however, is not the only one with eternal significance.

We are also invited to share the eternal significance of Christ by believing in him.

Our little lives are of eternal worth and significance and part of God’s gracious plan if we just allow God to weave us into the cosmic tapestry of his story. We are not accidental players in this drama. We are not just the unnamed extras on the credits of a Hollywood film.

We are at the very heart of this story. It is the story of a God of love who will not be alone, because love is for sharing and so this is the cosmic story of a God who wishes to create others who are free to love in return. The freedom to love entails the freedom to sin and sin means alienation from God, not fellowship, but God has thought of a solution to that from the very beginning before he embarked upon dividing the waters and creating the heavens and the earth, and that solution has now been revealed to the world in his Son, Jesus, born among us to redeem us.

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