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Isaiah 44.24-45.8 and Revelation 12.1-12

It's good to be back after three months of sabbatical; it was a precious time in which to simply Be; with myself, with those nearest to me and with God, the Ground of our Being. Time to Be, rather than to do; work, emails, strategies and all the stuff with which I normally fill my time. Some useful and good for sure, and some perhaps just a distraction from the void, the fear of emptiness, meaninglessness and death that busy-ness pushes away. Retreats and sabbaticals face you with that void, which for me at least means they are a struggle, as well as ultimately a source of joy and strength.

Coming back to work I pick it all up again, asking where is the Church in the midst of our world and what are we called to do?

Recent surveys point out that less than half of the population would now identify themselves as religious, and only 15% as Church of England. Many commentators rejoice at what appears to be the steady disappearance of the church from public life in this country. We as Christians can feel depressed. Depressed too by the huge forces around us over which we seem to have no control: Climate change, warmongering leaders, violent islamists, global mega companies, and the paralysis in our own political system. Ten years of austerity and a feeling we can’t go on like this, but can’t really make out an alternative. Sometimes I can feel a little at sea amidst collisions of ideologies and global events over which I have little control. Where is God in the midst all of this?

In many ways this was the context in which our Old Testament passage was written, about 500 years before Christ. The remnant of the once proud Jewish nation was something of a billiard ball amidst the collision of empires. After over sixty years in exile in Babylon, only the very old had any lived memory of Israel, Jerusalem and its fabulous Temple, now just a heap of charred ruins. Where was God in all this? Had he been defeated by the pagan Gods of Babylon? Now Cyrus the Persian was poised to sweep away Babylon itself. Buffeted by world events the Jews struggled to hold onto their faith. Where was God in all this?

God’s gift to Israel was the prophet we know as Second Isaiah who wrote chapters 40-55, from which we heard today. They assert that God is still the only Lord of heaven and earth. The hardship and suffering is not random but a consequence of failing to put God first; their inability to love God with all their heart, soul, mind and strength. The exile has been a kind of terrible purging for them, and now Second Isaiah asserts that all is not lost. God says, ‘Fear not, for I have redeemed you. I have called you by name.’ God is still there, is still the Lord, and Redemption is assured through Him. Even the terrifying King Cyrus, who is
sweeping aside nations with his Persian army... even Cyrus will be used by God as part of his redemptive plan, Isaiah confidently asserts, ‘He is my Shepherd, and he shall carry out my purpose.’

Despite the hard facts of history, Israel’s God is not small and defeated, sitting in a corner and licking his wounds... God is the Lord of heaven and earth! The House of God is the whole world, not just the Temple! With 2\textsuperscript{nd} Isaiah we are reminded that God’s call is for everyone on earth. ‘Turn to me and be saved all the ends of the earth. For I am God. There is no other.’

The Israelites have been so depressed about their own problems that they’ve been missing the bigger picture.... Israel’s mission and destiny is to work with God in the world. To be God’s Servant, noticing what God is doing in the world and joining in. Seeing Cyrus and thinking ‘What is God up to in Him? How will God somehow be using even him to take forward his purposes? How can we be part of that? Helping to bring in the Kingdom, the Kingly rule of God on earth as it is in heaven?’

Make no mistake, this call is a difficult one. It will involve blood, sweat and tears. God’s People are called to be the Suffering Servants of God. Faithful, though not always successful. Discouraged and frustrated, but always working to bring light out of darkness, true Godliness from idolatry. The suffering of God’s people will be real, undeserved and sometimes dreadful, but it is for God and for the people he loves. God’s people are called to faithfully live, suffer and endure to bring salvation to all.

This is still the task of the God’s People today, and that includes us as the Church. The world is changing, the church seems to be shrinking, its easy to give up hope. But God is the same, yesterday, today and forever. He is about more than church denominations. Second Isaiah calls us to have a bigger vision. As John Robinson once put it, ‘We have got to relearn that the House of God is primarily the world in which God lives, not the contractor’s hut set up in the grounds.’

If Church is about discipleship, learning to put God first, seeing his glory and living in the light of that, then discipleship is about the world, noticing together what God is up to and joining in, working to see God’s will done on earth as it is in heaven.

This will be hard, confusing and there will be times for us as Christians and as the church when all seems to be lost. Just as it was for our Master Jesus, who alone lived out Isaiah’s vision to the full.

‘Suffering Love conquers all’ as God in Christ seeks to reclaim the world as his own. This could be said to be the message of the Book of Revelation, from which we also heard today. And what a strange passage! ‘A pregnant woman cries out in birth pangs, a terrifying red
dragon standing before her, poised to devour the baby as soon as it is born. It's like a scene from a fantasy computer game or science fiction horror film. What's it all about? The Book of Revelation is a series of dreams and visions, fantastical in themselves but telling deeper stories, deeper truths.

The dragon, is multi headed, as evil always is. It comes in many forms to tempt, depress and drag us down. Named in verse 9 as Satan, this is the serpent who tempted Adam and Eve at the start of the bible story, Satan who tempted Jesus in the wilderness. The nagging, wheedling voice that undermines us all. Who appears in powerful global forces and ideologies to the present day.

In contrast the woman, 'clothed with the sun,' is a glorious figure, with a crown of twelve stars, like the twelve tribes and the twelve apostles. Is this Mary giving birth to Jesus? But also the church in verse 17, giving birth to disciples. She may even represent the whole of creation, groaning in agony as in Romans 8, for a new world to be born. A picture, a myth can be all these things.

Here she gives birth to a son, the Messiah of Psalm 2. Like King Herod, the devil stands poised to destroy him at birth. But the child is snatched from the dragon’s mouth and carried up to God and to his throne. We seem to have leapt straight from the birth of Jesus to his resurrection and ascension.... but then things can happen quickly in dreams! But perhaps the child’s birth in the vision, is actually telling us about Christ’s death? When in the face of apparent defeat on the Cross, victory is plucked from Satan’s mouth. Jesus dies, and evil appears to have won.

But then there is that ‘deeper magic from the dawn of time...’ the slow grinding sound of that great stone being lifted and the quiet song of the two angels.... As the crucified, suffering servant is raised victorious from the grave. Revelation talks of War in Heaven but in Jesus victory has already been won. We live in the light of that victory, confident in Christ, and in his Love stronger than anything, even death itself. Satan, the heavenly accuser has been thrown down. Evil still stalks the earth, but believers conquer by the ‘Blood of the Lamb and by the word of their testimony.’ Liturgy lies at the heart of Revelation because of the conviction that what we do in worship lies behind what we do in the world. If we honour God aright then the War at the heart of things is resolved.

If Cyrus can be part of God’s plan, then so can you and me.... each moment of every day.... as we long and pray and work and suffer to see God's kingdom come on earth as it is in heaven;
When all are set free to love God... heart and soul... and their neighbours as themselves.