

THE GOSPEL ACCORDING TO ISAIAH

Hope fulfilled

Isaiah 11:1-16

Hope has been described as the oxygen of the soul. Unlike Robert Louis Stevenson's observation "to travel hopefully is better than to arrive", Christian hope is grounded in the promise of God. It is not a matter of human ability and potential, rather the sure and certain expectation that a faithful God will achieve that which he has purposed and planned. This is the touchstone of Isaiah's prophecy about Jesus the Messiah. Not only is he "a shoot from the stump of Jesse" (v1), i.e. a descendant of King David's father in royal lineage, he is "the root of Jesse" i.e. the one from whom Jesse receives life.

The passage comprises of two poems (vv1-9) and (vv12-16) separated by a prose section (v10,11). The first poem deals with the king and the nature of the world as a paradise where he reigns. The second deals with the world-wide people of God gathered to the king's banner. Verse 10 effectively concludes the first poem and v11 introduces the second. Another way of understanding the passage is to divide the chapter thematically viz.

- i. The nature of the perfect king (vv1,2)
- ii. The justice of his perfect rule (vv3-5)
- iii. The peace of his perfect rule (vv6-9)
- iv. The glory of his perfect rule (vv12-16)

Contemporary critics have dismissed this biblical world view as mere wishful thinking. Bertrand Russell the brilliant philosopher and mathematician argues that 'Man is the product of impersonal causes. His origin, growth, hopes and fears, loves and beliefs are but the accidental allocation of atoms. No fire, no heroism can preserve an individual life beyond the grave. The whole temple of man's achievement must invariably be buried beneath the debris of a universe in ruins'. Little wonder then that this depressing prognosis of the human condition leads to widespread despair and futility.

T.S. Elliot in his poem "The Hollow Man" is hardly less assuring 'This is the way the world ends... not with a bang, but a whimper.' The world might not end in cataclysmic disaster with asteroids destroying the earth, it will simply wind down due to climate change. The world view of the Bible is entirely different. Just as the coming of Immanuel was promised in chapter nine and realized in history eight hundred years later, the return of Immanuel, not as a vulnerable infant, but as the conquering king is equally certain.

Three things emerge from taking Isaiah's prophecy to heart:

- i. Expectation about the future

We can define ourselves as people who belong to the future here and now. The resurrection of Jesus is *the* great sign of hope that will be ours when we are raised to life with him. Paul reminds us in 2 Cor 1:20, "No matter how many promises God has made, they are 'yes' in Christ".

ii. Trust in God's promises

Patient waiting for the believer is not passive resignation but active engagement with the heart and mind of God. "Those who wait for the Lord will renew their strength" (Isa 40:31) and "God acts on behalf of those who wait for him" (Isa 64:4).

iii. Patient waiting

We wait patiently not in mere hope based on human ability and achievement, rather in the sure and certain hope that God is true to his Word and will deliver on his promise.

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