**St. Margaret’s English Community – RCIA**

**The Prophetic Books of the Old Testament, Part IV**

**The Song of Zion: Lamentations and 2nd and 3rd Isaiah**

*The Book of Lamentations* [NAB pp 997 to 1004]

*Second Isaiah Chaps. 40-55* [NAB 904 to 922]

*Third Isaiah Chaps. 56-66* [NAB 922 to 934]

Biblical archaeologists excavating around various parts of the Holy Land, but most especially those concentrating on the Kingdom of Judah [Southern Kingdom] have discovered that the vast number of cities and towns destroyed during the 6th c BC were never rebuilt. This gave evidence of the widespread loss of life and destruction of property that left cities and towns burned to ashes, lifeless. As we saw in our lectures on both Jeremiah and Ezekiel, the people who were carried off to Babylonia in exile were among the wealthiest or successful of landowners, tradesmen and educated class. Those left behind were so few that they were unable to rebuild. We should note that what remained of the Southern Kingdom, Judah, was a swath of land 40 km north to south and 32 km east to west covering the land between Jerusalem in the north to Hebron in the south.

If we look back to chapters 40 and 41 of the *Book of Jeremiah*, we see that Jeremiah remained behind in Judah as many were carried off in exile. The Babylonians had appointed Gedaliah, from a princely family closely aligned to the reforms of King Josiah, as a provincial leader over what was left of Judah in 586 BC. But a zealot, Ishmael – supported by the age-old enemies of the Israelites, the Edomites – assassinated Gedaliah, and with that, Jeremiah fled south into Egypt with many others. What was left of this small province in Palestine was placed under the Babylonian-appointed governor in Samaria, and the long-standing rivalries between the northern and southern kingdoms began again, which came to a head when the remnants of the Babylonian exile from Judah returned and did not want to be under the power of a ruler in Samaria, the capital of the northern kingdom. On their side, the Samarians did not like the idea of losing this buffer zone to the south.

***The Book of Lamentations***

Already in my lectures of the prophets Jeremiah and Ezekiel I have mentioned the *Book of Lamentations*, a book that is important as a primary source of information about the disastrous conditions in Jerusalem and Judah after the Babylonian attack and the forced exile.

*Lamentations* consists of five “laments”:

*The Desolation of Jerusalem* (1:1-22)

*The Lord’s Wrath and Zion’s Ruin* (2:1-22)

*The Voice of a Suffering Individual* (3:1-66)

*Miseries of the Besieged City* (4:1-22)

*The Community’s Lament to the Lord* (5:1-22)

The lamentations are poems written in the style of an “acrostic” poem, with the first line of each Lamentation starting with the first letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and the second line starting with the second letter of the Hebrew alphabet, and so on. This gives the reader a sense of a very controlled emotion in which anger, anguish, and agony all struggle to burst out but cannot find a way. To intensify this sense of grief, the author(s) of the poems have also chosen and included the traditional form of funerial laments. It is like a long funeral dirge for what is dead – Jerusalem, the temple, the king, and a way of life.

But rather than seeing Jerusalem as dead or a dead body, the author(s) use the image of a widow. Personified as “daughter Zion” and using the feminine pronouns (she, her), they show a widow weeping bitterly over her loss. Now alone and afflicted by her total loss of everything and everybody, she finds no one who can possibly comfort her (*Lam* 1:1-2).

These five poems give us a stark and trifling image of the conditions of the land after the fall of Jerusalem (see *Lam 4:9-10*).

But even in the midst of such desolation, *Lamentations* holds out hope that God will turn from his anger and wrath and restore his people. While the author(s) accept that God punished the people of Judah justly (*Jerusalem has sinned grievously, therefore she has become a mockery… Her uncleanness is on her skirt, she has no thought of her future*.” *Lam* 1:8-9), yet the author(s) can exclaim in chapter 3, “*Let us lift up our hearts as well as our hands toward God in heaven! ‘We have rebelled and been obstinate; you have not forgiven us*’ (*Lam* 3:41-42). The people accept that God can be justifiably strict (*Lam* 2:21; 4:11), and yet they can almost in the next sentence express their trust that God will not abandon them forever (*Lam* 3:21-24).

Given the vividness of these scenes and expressions, most scholars agree that the author(s) were eyewitnesses of the fall of Jerusalem. The poems date from shortly after 586 BC and were written in Judah itself, not in exile. The only mystery is the identity of the authors. An ancient tradition associates the book with the prophet Jeremiah, which is why *Lamentations* is placed currently immediately after the *Book of Jeremiah*. And we have a reference in *2 Chronicles* 35:25, “*Jeremiah also composed a lamentation for Josiah, which is recited to this day by all the male and female singers in their lamentations for Josiah. These have been made an ordinance for Israel and can be found written in the LAMENTATIONS*.”

Biblical scholars have noted similarities too in the style of some of the lamentations and the style of Jeremiah, such as *Lam 2:13* and *Jer 8:22; 30:13*). A point to keep in mind is that to understand what Jeremiah was seeing in his visions of God’s judgments, one needs to read *Lamentations*.

*Psalm 137* “How will we sing a song of the Lord”

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=lqYIMLH5NMI>

or the poignant “On the Willows: from *Godspell*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FO6r_hajQvM>

A very moving rendition of what it was like for the Israelites in exile.

In 562 BC, Nebuchadnezzar died. His sons and successors were not able to match his strength and ability to rule so vast an empire, and so it began coming apart. One aspect of change was a more relaxed attitude toward the conquered peoples in exile. King Amemarduk (or Evil-merodach, as he is called in Hebrew - see 2 Kings 25:27-30) was negligent as a leader; it took the short reigns of three kings until the time of King Nabonidus and his heir Balshezzar (who we read about in the *Book of Daniel*) that led ultimately to the Persian takeover of Babylon under King Cyrus in a campaign that began in 546 and ended with the fall of Croesus and ultimately the fall of Babylon in 539 (after conquering much of the territories to the east of Persia to present day Afghanistan). The rise of the Persian Empire and the overthrow of the Babylonian Empire in its wake provided the opportunity for the Israelites, under the benevolence of Cyrus to return to their homeland in Palestine.

***Second Isaiah* chap. 40-55**

The section of Isaiah called *Deutero-Isaiah* or *Second Isaiah* is also called the “Book of Consolation.” In this section the prophet offers no judgment or condemnation of Israel, but a message of trust and confident hope that God is about to end the exile. In this way, chronologically these chapters are seen as separate from the earlier writings of Isaiah (chapters 1 through 39), and together with new descriptive titles for God, *Second Isaiah* also is filled with images of rebuilding, restoring, renewing and re-creating. The poetic sections of *Second Isaiah* have the quality of hymns or psalms of praise.

We note in *Second Isaiah* in chapters 44 and 45 (among others) praise given to Cyrus as the liberator, “*my shepherd who carries out my every will*” (Isa. 44:28), and refers to Cyrus as God’s “*anointed*” (Isa 45:1).

The victorious campaigns of Cyrus extending the Persian Empire west and conquering first Babylonia, and then all the way to Palestine making him the master of the Middle East by the time of his death in 530 form the backdrop for a new prophet to rise after Ezekiel, one who would arise among the exiled in Babylon but prepare them now for their return to Palestine, fulfilling the ancient prophecies of Jeremiah and Ezekiel among others.

At the outset, quite a number of exiles did not want to return to Samaria and Judah – they were born in exile and had become successful citizens in Babylonia, and saw no reason to make the arduous and risky journey to a homeland that they never knew. But those who did choose to return were now referred to in Scripture as “good figs” or more popularly as “the REMNANT”. It is at this exact time that “*Deutero-Isaiah*” appears and begins his preaching, taking over the work of Ezekiel purifying the people and preparing them for their return. The fall of Babylon provided for the prophet the opening to convince the people of God’s hand at work now through Cyrus.

Our knowledge of the author of *Deutero-Isaiah* is limited to what scholars consider his CALL (Isa. 61:1-3) and possibly also Isa. 40:4-11 as autobiographical. We can glean from the chapters of Second Isaiah (40-55) that his ministry extended from 550 to 540 BC, while *Third Isaiah* (chapters 56-66) appear to emanate from Jerusalem itself after the exiles returned. In contradistinction of Isaiah, *Deutero-Isaiah* is a trained poet, and his use of images and metaphors in a way soars – inspires. He is considered much like the poet *Dante* was for the Renaissance – the poet par excellence of the Bible. He moves to lyric heights when contemplating God’s works and what he has in store for the remnant returning from exile. Perhaps it is for this reason that second only to the Psalms, the writings of Second Isaiah inspire many musical passages and hymns.

The inspiration for “Be Not Afraid” to encourage the remnant to be ready to return:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=hjbnWhXJOT4>

And the inspiration for the *Dance of Isaiah* in all Orthodox weddings:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=pRW867zBKNA>

There are two divisions in Second Isaiah: chapters 40 to 48 and then 49 to 55. In the earlier chapters, emphasis is on the whole nation of Israel, while in the latter emphasis is on Jerusalem and Zion.

Another noticeable pattern is a form of Trial Speeches such as Isaiah 41:1-5; 41:21-29; 42:18-25; 43:8013; 43:22-28; and 45:18-25. These are subdivided into

*Arraignment* *Charges* *Witnesses* *Decision*

41:21 41:22-24 41:25-28 41:29

42:18 42:19-20 42:21-24 42:25

43:22a 43:22b-24 43:26-27 43:28

Or LAWSUITS such as Isaiah 41:12-31; 44:24-28; 45:9-13; 46:5-11; 48:12-15; 55:8-13.

*Basis of Charges The Outcome*

44:24-26a 44:26b-28

45:9-10 45:11-13

48:12-13 48:14-15

We find in man y parts of *Second Isaiah* formulations declaring God’s intention to save Israel. One type is called a “proclamation of salvation” arranged as a formal answer to the people’s complaints that God has abandoned them or let them down. It always mentions the people disturbed about something, and then follows with a declaration that God has heard and does intervene for them. The second type is labelled an “oracle of salvation” which imitates the formal prayer for help that a prophet or priest would say during temple services over someone who was sick or in need of healing. These always include the calming words of YHWH “*Be not afraid*” – see Isaiah 48:8-13.

**Proclamations of Salvation**: Isa. 41:17-20; 43:156-21; 49:7-12; 51:9-14; 51:17-23.

*Introduction Community’s Complaint Proclamation of Salvation*

43:16-17 43:18 43:19-21

49:7a 49:7b 49:8-12

51:9-11 51:12-14

**Oracles of Salvation**: Isa. 41:14-16; 44:1-5; 54:4-6

*Address Words of Assurance Promise of Salvation*

41:14 41:14 41:15-16

44:1-2 44:2 44:3-5

54:5-6 54:4b

Another literary technique of *Second Isaiah* is called “idol parodies.” Here the prophet mocks the faith that pagans have in idols made of wood or stone, such as in Isa. 40:19-20; 41:6-7; 44:9-20 and 46:6-7, where he chides on how much human effort is needed to make gods that have no real power at all. He contrasts this to the power of the God of Israel (Isa. 46:6-7).

One other technique used in the writings of *Second Isaiah* is the use of first-person statements of praise placed in the mouth of God: “*I the Lord was there at the beginning*” (Isa. 41:4), or “*I alone am the Lord, your God*” (Isa. 42:8 – “*For I am the Lord your God, the Holy One of Israel*.”). Such dramatic phrases are used often in *Second Isaiah*… and those listening to this would be reminded of God proclaiming on Mount Sinai for the Covenant, “*I am the Lord your God*!” (Exo. 20:2)

As mentioned already, *Deutero- or Second Isaiah* begins with chapter 40 which is a prologue to this second part. This section opens and sets the theme for the whole of book two. Although no person is given a name, we hear voices speaking and can easily detect the typical questions used in a story about the call of a prophet, as in Isaiah 6 or Jeremiah 1 or Ezekiel 2-3. Here, God asks his heavenly council whom he should send as his messenger to announce the “hood news”: *Comfort, comfort my people says your God. Speak tenderly to Jerusalem and announce to her that her slavery is ended and her sins have been pardoned*” (Isa 40:1-2). God’s people have paid twice the penalty and now shall receive SALVATION. What that salvation will be is made clear in versus 10-31: God is coming to be with his people,; he will shepherd the flock; he will be the Creator who controls the nations; he alone will have power; he will give strength to the weary and the weak.

The prophet sems very eager to accept this CALL – this mission (see v. 5-6!)

His mission is to proclaim “*Here is your God*!” (v. 9). *Second* Isaiah never tires repeating the titles of God such as Saviour, Holy One, King, Creator, Lord, Redeemer, the First and Last, Justifier, and others. He is constantly singing a song of praise to YHWH – and the key to this is that God is ACTIVE – he is PRESENT. YHWH did not just do things in the past – he is doing them now for Israel, if only the people would look around and see.

There are a number of themes repeated throughout *Second Isaiah* such as that God’s WORD is all-powerful (Isa. 40:1-9 and 55:6-11); God will give mercy and forgiveness; God will do new things never seen before (Isa. 42:9; 48: 6-7); he refers to a new exodus (leading the people back out of slavery in Babylon to their homeland – Isa. 42:16; 43:5-7; 43:16-21; 49:7-12; 51:9-10; 52:7-12 and 55:12-13. There is also the promise of being fed with manna and water as with Moses Isa. 41:17-20; 43:18-20; 48:20-21). God will guide them through the wilderness like a shepherd leading his flock (Isa. 40:11; 49:9-11; 43:16-21) etc… Another theme is that YHWH is the Redeemer of Israel – no one uses the word “Redeemer” in the Bible more than *Second Isaiah* (Isa 54:1-10; Cyrus as one chosen by God to redeem 45:1-7;) and then the idea of a new creation coming; and that there will be a place for new nations in this new creation, and finally the theme of the restoration of ZION. (Isa. 49:14-15).

But probably the most critical and important aspect of *Second Isaiah* is with the four Servant Songs: Isa. 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-9; and 52:13-53:12.

The first Servant Song (42:1-4) describes the mission for the servant who will bring justice by means of gentle persuasion and quietness. The second Servant Psalm (49:1-6) suggests that speak will be part of the servant’s mission, but even more he must show trust when he has no strength. Through this, he will become a witness to the nations. The third Servant Song (50:4-9) describes again the role of the servant speaking but this time mixed with suffering and rejection. By accepting this mission, the servant will discover God’s support, and his cause will end in victory. The fourth Servant Song (52:13 – 53:12) expresses in moving language how God uses the undeserved violence against his servant to save other guilty people. It is the only instance in the Old Testament of the concept of vicarious suffering. This is the famous passage of the “suffering servant” of Isaiah. It is a remarkable passage because it suggests more clearly than anywhere else in the Old Testament that God accepts one individual’s suffering to atone for the sins of others. All is still in the hands of the powerful Creator and Redeemer to deliver the servant. Yet only God would value this broken and beaten servant who can no longer speak. This is another way of affirming that in the end YHWH accepts the helpless in their helplessness and suffering more than he does the strong.

For the people of the New Testament, this suffering servant is Jesus the Christ.

**Third Isaiah – chapters 56-66**

Written after the return from exile, this last part of Isaiah describes the conditions of the land to which the people returned through a mixture of prose and poetry. Unlike *Deutero-Isaiah*, *Third Isaiah* is filled with condemnation of Israel’s sin (Isa. 57:1-13; 58:1-9; 59:9-15; 65:1-7). This leads scholars to see these as oracles who speak in the time after the return to Jerusalem.

While *Second Isaiah* was filled with hope and promise, *Third Isaiah* is filled with challenges against the people who were unable to live up to God’s expectations. The Lord wants justice and not fasting; he wants faithfulness to the covenant and not just words of violence; he wants repentance and a spirit of humility. In a word, God wants his law to be written in their hearts.

*Third Isaiah* reflects the tension between the vision of a renewed Israel and the plain hard reality that the exiles found on their return of a desolate land and ruin all around. Chapter 58 is especially important for the concept of divine justice that the prophets seek (Isa. 58:6-8). This teaching is repeated by Jesus in his vision of the last judgment (Matt. 25:31-46).