

Isaiah 64; 1-9; Mark 13: 24-37

30.11.14

The heartfelt cry / The advent 'yet'.

‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’ That is the cry from the heart, a cry of anguish and yearning, that launches the journey known as advent that we embark upon today. ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’ I think you could argue that that it is a cry that echoes throughout the whole course of human history. Wherever there has been suffering, and heaven knows there has been more than enough of that; wherever there has been injustice and mourning and crying and pain of which there has been far too much, it is this cry that is never far from the lips of those who believe in God: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down.’ It rises up from the earth like a broken chorus. It rises up from war zones and from ebola-struck regions of Africa; it rises up from hospitals and hospices and from the squalid prisons where the victims of dictators lie: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’ Here however, in our reading from Isaiah this morning, this cry rises up from off the page in a particular context. There are specific reasons for its utterance, and it’s worth taking a moment to consider them.

These were dark days for what was left of the nation of Israel. They were living in a period of crushing disappointment when it should have been a joyful time. The voices of the people should have been raised in praise and thanksgiving for it was not long since there had been a decisive change in the nation’s fortunes. On the international scene the great power of Babylon had been broken and replaced by the empire of Persia and for Israel that meant a season of homecoming. The empire of Babylon had spelt defeat and exile for Israel. Leading citizens had been taken off to Babylon, leaving behind a temple destroyed and a city ransacked and ruined. It had been a deeply traumatic time, but now the Persians had allowed the exiles to return home and the task of reconstruction could begin. It could be a time of restoration and new beginnings. The trouble is it wasn’t. If we had read on to verse 11 of chapter 64 we would have heard this:

‘our holy and glorious sanctuary

In which our forefathers praised you,
has been burnt to the ground
and all that we cherished lies in ruins.’

In other words the temple is still rubble, there has been no reconstruction of God’s dwelling place. And without God’s dwelling place God seemed absent and remote. And there was much else besides that was blighting life. There were evidently tensions and conflicts between the returning exiles and those who had been left behind, and all this contributed to an air of hopelessness and depression that hung over the people. Great hopes of new beginnings after the long night of exile had evaporated like the morning mist.

What is so striking here however is the startling candour and honesty that we find in this section of Isaiah, not just in the verses that we read but in the preceding chapter as well. What we find here is an extraordinary conflict of emotions targeted at God, a strange mixture of accusation and confession. Listen to verse 15 of chapter 63:

‘Look down from heaven and see,
from your holy and glorious habitation.
Where are your zeal and your might?
The yearning of your heart and your compassion?
They are withheld from me...’

In other words, ‘come down from the safety of ‘on high’, come down, God, come down from the detached protection of heaven and show a bit of commitment, a bit of passion. Don’t turn your back on us!’ Should we dare to talk to God like that? And again, just a couple of verses later in chapter 63 we read quite shockingly:

‘Why, O Lord, do you make us stray
from your ways
and harden our hearts so that we do not fear you?’

That’s neat, isn’t it? Did you catch that? Yes, we’re sinners who wander from your ways – yes, but you make us, and you harden our hearts. And again, in our passage, I wonder if you noticed verse 5:

‘But you were angry, and we sinned;
because you hid yourself we transgressed.’

Yes, we sinned, God, we transgressed, but it’s your fault because you hid yourself! Should we dare to talk to God like that? And there follows the

stark admission, ‘We all became like something unclean and all our righteous deeds were like a filthy rag’. But even that confession of guilt is followed by a reprimand: ‘for you have hidden your face from us and have delivered us into the hand of our iniquity.’

You see, here is Israel’s turmoil. Here is their shame about themselves and their sin but also their anger and their recrimination at God and God’s behaviour. And this is the context in which they cry out: ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down!’ It’s a cry of anger and resentment. What feeds into that cry is all Israel’s confusion about God, their bewilderment at the sorry mess that they find themselves in and God’s part in it. And the cry is for God to come down in power and majesty and might and to shake the mountains, to come down in fire like God did of old with Moses on Mt Sinai. Come as you did before, for without such a display of power there can be no new beginning.

What a note that is to begin Advent on! This cosy season of advent candles and gentle nativity scenes begins with this heart-felt cry of despair, even indignation at God. Here surely in these convoluted verses, we find expressed all our ambivalence and uncertainty about God – if only we could be as honest and forthright as Isaiah. Here is this perplexing mixture of shame and blame: shame at our own folly and failure, and yet also that deep-seated sense that God is to blame too. Here we are in this mess and we recognise our fault but God, you are culpable too - for not doing enough, for not sorting it out. After all, God, aren’t you all-powerful? ‘O that you would tear open the heavens and come down...’

Ideally I think we ought really to just stop there and pause a while. In this fraught place where this text takes us, caught between confession and accusation, torn between human culpability and divine responsibility, we should linger awhile. We should not rush to resolution, not hurry to get either ourselves or God off the hook.

Prayer

O God as we gather here, we find ourselves bewildered and perplexed by our world, a world of such wonder and beauty and yet of such tragedy and suffering. And at times we wonder where you are in it all. We know all about our own sin and folly but we long sometimes for you to do more and to intervene, and to fulfil your promises that all will be well with the world.

And so we pray again –

tear open the heavens and come down and curb the violence that scars your world;

tear open the heavens and come down and overturn the evil plans of the wicked who murder and rape and maim in the name of religion;

tear open the heavens and come down and cast down the mighty who dispense injustice from their thrones.

Come down, O God, come down and save us. May your will indeed be done on earth as in heaven and may your kingdom come.

.....

Hymn 359: *He came down that we might have love... / peace....
Why did he come...?*

So after our pause we return to our text and as we read on we are drawn to one word, one single small word that breaks in and prods us in a different direction altogether: the word ‘yet’. It comes after more resentment in verse 7, more fist-waving at God:

‘... because you hid yourself we transgressed...’

Here once again God is accused and implicated in Israel’s sin – ‘it’s all your fault...’. But then, suddenly, unexpectedly, the single word: ‘yet’.

‘Yet, O Lord, you are our Father;

we are the clay, and you are our potter...

the work of your hand.’

This comes at us from nowhere, completely out of the blue and out of sync with everything that has gone before. This is not the God Isaiah appealed to at the beginning of this chapter. This is not the God who tears open the heavens and shakes the mountains and sets fire to the brushwood. No - this is the Father. This is the potter in whose hands we are clay. And just ponder those images of Father, and the potter and the clay.

Father is a parental image, one that speaks of love, and commitment, someone who will never abandon or betray us but who stays by us and cannot let us go. Father is not an image primarily of power and strength but of loyalty and faithfulness. The father may not tear open the heavens and set fire to our enemies but he will stand by us and neither leave us nor forsake us. And think of the potter. The hands of the potter are rough and to be the clay means sometimes that we feel that we are being squeezed and pummelled and pressed. There are times when the hands of the potter are not tender but rough - violent even. And the clay must endure the heat of the fire, the fierceness of the flame. 'Yet' - yet they are loving hands, hands that are engaged in fashioning something that can be of service and something of great beauty. No, these are not hands that tear open the heavens and sort everything out - 'yet' they are active, engaged in something different, something creative and, above all, they are hands that can be trusted.

'Yet you are our father; we are the clay and you are the potter'. You see, what this 'yet' does is to pull the rug from under Isaiah's complaints against God. This 'yet' undercuts Isaiah's plea that God should recreate Mount Sinai and come in fire and smoke and earthquake. This 'yet' says that there is more to God than raw, naked power, more to God than hands that tear and fingers that click and make everything right at our behest. This 'yet' does not even try to answer Isaiah's complaints that God has been neglectful and that it's all God's fault. No, what we are given here is a clean break with everything we think a God ought to be - all power and holiness - and which puts us instead into the hands of a father, a potter.

Can we relate to Israel here in this passage? Can we understand Israel's complaints, Israel's resentment and ambivalence about God? Can we not put ourselves in Israel's shoes? Based on this passage from Isaiah Advent is a season of candour and honesty. It's an invitation to open up all our doubts and our fears, our resentments and recriminations about an all-powerful God who presides over such a world as this. And God does not try to justify Godself. God enters no defence. Yes, God has a case against us and we have a case against God and we can endlessly wrangle and argue and point the finger, but at the end of it all what we are given are not explanations or rationalisations. What we are given is a different image of

God, a different picture – ‘yet, you are our father... our potter’. And these images are invitations to trust.

And come the end of Advent we will be given an even more extraordinary image of God, an even more staggering picture – not of one who tears open the heavens but of a baby in a manger, all fragile flesh and powerlessness and vulnerability. Alleluia forevermore.

*Hymn 359: He came down that we might have joy... / hope...
Why did he come...?*

O loving God,
 Father, Mother, potter, baby cradled in a manger,
 come to those who need reassurance today.
 Come to those who have cause to doubt you...
 come to those who are sinners in need of forgiveness...
 come to the innocent who suffer from a cruel world...
 come to those who suffer because of others' selfishness...
 come to those who suffer for the cause of right but
 fear that they will not be vindicated...
 come to them as a divine parent,
 come to them with hands that are scarred,
 hands that embrace in forgiveness,
 hands that can make all things new.
 We pray in the name of the One in whom you came
 and reached out to us from Bethlehem's manger,
 Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

Creator God,
Maker of all things in heaven and on earth,
God who took the clay and moulded and fashioned it
and breathed life into it,
we worship and praise you.
Advent God, come amongst us in the flesh of Jesus of Nazareth,,
Remaking and recreating our fractured world,
we worship and praise you.
Spirit of God,
come in water and in fire
to complete your creation and makes us yours
we worship and praise your holy name.

O God,
far above and beyond this troubled world,
we praise you that you have torn open heaven
and come to amongst us to dwell,
sharing our joy and our sorrow,
and offering your self to us that we might receive new life.
We confess to your our sins,
acknowledging our faults and failures
and we join together saying...

O God fire us afresh with your love,
reshape us that our lives may reflect your glory,
for we pray in Jesus' name and in his
words we pray together saying....