

Lent 3C, 7th March, 2010
Isaiah 55:1-9; Psalm 63; Luke 13:31-35

God's Ways

From our passage from Isaiah today:

“For my thoughts are not your thoughts,
nor are your ways my ways, says the Lord.
For as the heavens are higher than the earth,
so are my ways higher than your ways
and my thoughts than your thoughts.” [Isaiah 55:9]

Tell me how often you might have thought –even said - something like this: “If I was God, I would have planned that differently” (whatever “that” might be – the world, our lives, things that turned out to be disasters). And of course we’re implying that we would have done it better. Or perhaps I’m the only one who’s ever had their thoughts stray that way.

St Theresa of Avila, sixteenth century Spanish nun and mystic, put the same sentiment to God a little differently: “If that's how you treat your friends, it's no wonder you have so few of them.”

And consider the roll call of God’s heroes:

Noah who got drunk.
Abraham who lied about his wife.
Jacob who was a deceiver.
Moses who murdered an Egyptian.
Rahab who was a harlot.
Samson who had serious problems with lust and anger.
David who was an adulterer.
Paul who persecuted the church.
Peter who denied Christ.

Is that how any of us might have planned God's redemptive history? And just don't get me started on the heroes and saints of the Church. Weird, a lot of them. Definitely not our ways! Most of them would never pass muster at an ordination selection interview.

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Those verses can either be consoling, or worrying. Consoling or comforting, in that God is present and active in ways unimaginable to us, and we can trust him; or worrying, if we need to control and we can't let go of believing our plans or strategies are better than God's.

First, let's get a heresy out of the way: these are not verses telling us that God makes something bad happen so that he can then make something better happen. That's not God's way –that's not the way he's talking about.

[We have to be really careful about that sort of cause and effect thinking about God – it’s a trap –even heresy -humanity is prone to fall into -to think that God **causes** -**makes** -bad things to happen in order to show up or create good –that’s one of the very ways that is not God].

Listen to what Isaiah is saying to Israel, and to us: **don’t let our circumstances, our faith, our responses, be confined or moulded by the ways of the world and the limitations of our knowledge.** Don’t try to fit God and events into our limited range of knowledge and understanding. Trust that his ways are higher – and better!

What we unpack here, in our reading from Isaiah, and also from the Gospel today, is a God who is unlike the powers and ways of this world; a God who does not do things in ways that are expected according to the world’s values and systems. A God who doesn’t deal in the ways of the world, whose thoughts and ways stretch beyond our best, beyond anything that we can imagine or plot for ourselves.

We find Isaiah speaking some 600 years before Christ, to the people of Judah and Jerusalem who had been forcibly taken into exile several decades previously. Isaiah brings a word of hope of return. This is not the first time he’s spoken hope; and not the first time he’s not being well heard. God has promised their return, but the people were finding it very hard to hope after decades of suffering. Their exile seems to go on and on. Their plaintive cry from captivity is “how long?”. Always in the background is the cry for justice –their situation is unjust, contrary to what surely is best for God’s people. Their lives are dry. They thirst. Where is God? What is he doing? How can they return –to Jerusalem, and to the life God promises?

Isaiah responds obliquely to their cries, their thirsting after God; drawing attention to the nature of God. The God he evokes is presented in solid contrast to the ways of the world: “Come buy wine and milk without money and without price”. An offering of rich food without cost. This is a God who longs to lavish us and satisfy us with more than we can imagine. Astounding for then – wine and milk and rich food – way out of the ordinary person’s league – possible at the wedding feasts of the wealthy, perhaps. And astounding for now – the offer of a free anything usually comes with strings attached. But neither one’s need nor one’s ability to pay will stifle this gift. Israel is exhorted to listen, to seek the Lord, call upon him and return to him in heart and spirit. There is the message that nothing that we could afford to buy with our own wealth or effort will satisfy the hunger and thirst we have within us for our God. Only God can do that.

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The people of Israel looked for a Messiah who would rescue them, who would establish their supremacy. A return to God hinged around a return to

Jerusalem as the centre of the world. God was found in the Temple in Jerusalem. They hear Isaiah's call in those terms or context – they're fitting God's words into the box of their experience; whilst Isaiah is calling them into something far greater than military might and a God fixed in one place. They're called into God's place of an overflowing generosity of the richest sort of nourishment. Just as we are.

It might seem like our Gospel reading is a far cry from the Isaiah passage. But there are corresponding echoes. Jesus is on his way to Jerusalem. Herod's out to kill him. But Jesus resolutely states that he will continue on his way; God's work is still to be done. He knows the risks, and he sees his death ahead of him. He doesn't seek protection; he doesn't stop his doing of his Father's work; he doesn't use his popularity and his followers to get back at Herod. He does not – and will not - use the ways of the world to achieve the purposes of God. He will not use political power, spiritual power, or social coercion. Nor will he bend God's purposes to have them make better sense in popular terms.

And Jesus underlines the difference between his way –God's way, and the ways and expectations of the world by using contrasting images – the fox and the mother hen. The wily and dangerous fox asserting power with fangs that would cause fear and would destroy life; or, to use a contemporary example of the fox – a world which says that getting ahead should be one's aim in life and to use any means, fair or foul to get there. And, in contrast, there's the mother hen offering protection and life for her chicks –no fangs, no claws, wings wide open, vulnerable, “only a willingness to shield her babies with her own body.”ⁱ In contemporary but timeless terms- the person whose desire and aim in life is to live as God wills and calls, and to do nothing other than to place themselves in God's hands –or under his wings. And far from rejecting those who would reject and destroy him, Jesus laments over them; he loves them, and in the end dies for them. Willingly dying for someone is certainly not the world's ways. In Jesus, we have the stark example of God's ways not being our ways; in fact, turning the expectations and ways of the world upside down.

Lent presents us with uncomfortable questions and paradoxes; and answers that will not satisfy while-ever we look and listen with eyes and ears that try to fit God into our known world and agendas. Lent calls us to “seek the Lord”; to listen carefully to him and to come to him, so that we feast richly and live.

The take-home questions: are you prepared to let God stretch you beyond your understanding of life and of himself? Are you prepared to trust in God's surprising ways?

ⁱ Barbara Brown Taylor. *As a Hen Gathers her Brood*. Christian Century