

SERMON: 2017/12/03 (1st Sunday of Advent, Year B) - Is. 64:1-9, 1 Cor. 1:3-9 & Mk. 13:24-37_BTR

As with the last two weeks, we take another "leap" forward in Israel's history this morning.

Although a *very* small one: perhaps only ten years or so:

Last time we heard from a prophet called, "Ezekiel:" he had been taken prisoner along with his king Jeconiah and a "handful" of others by the Babylonians [indicate on map], and how he warned his people - the "Jews," those remaining Israelites who lived in the south of the "Promised Land" - to obey God and, with that in mind, to, in particular, share generously with the poor, or something similar might happen to them too.

Well, after (some of) you had left, I mentioned to the mums and dads that, back home, here, in Jerusalem [indicate on map], Jeconiah was replaced by his son, Zedekiah.

But the problem with Zedekiah was this: he *wasn't* very good at keeping promises.

In fact, he was *terrible* at it.

He would say one thing, and then do the opposite.

And one of the things that he promised to do *but didn't* was that he told the emperor of the Babylonians, Nebuchadnezzar, that he was *his* best friend - a loyal servant. And that he wouldn't make friends with any other (rival) kings. *And yet that's what he did!*

And almost right away.

He secretly said to Pharaoh in Egypt: "Psst! Hey, let's team up. You and me."

And so, when Nebuchadnezzar found out, he was really, really hurt.

In fact, he was *sooo(!)* upset that he marched his massive army back and captured Zedekiah; and then, to punish him, killed his children in front of him and *cut* out his eyes. [2 Kgs. 25:5-7]

And they didn't stop there.

The Babylonians went up to The Temple - not only a beautiful, *unique*, majestic building but also *the* holiest place on earth - God Himself would appear inside as a choking, blinding cloud [see: 1 Kgs. 8:10 / 2 Chron. 5:14] - and they *smashed* it *down!*

They also set fire to the city around it. [2 Kgs. 25:9-17]

Then, they seized all the people, tied them up, and marched them off into captivity, to live, widely dispersed, in miserable slums and ghettos all over the empire. [n.1]

Death, separation, destruction.

It looked like the incredible, miraculous, *wonderful* story of Abraham's family - the Hebrew slaves - was finally over. And what an *awfully* sad end it was.

Let's pray: Father God, help us to keep our promises: When we say we're going to do something, give us the courage - the good character - to do better than Zedekiah, and to "keep our word," amen.

[Ask the children to leave.]

How do you pray?
Such an important question!
Do you do it only on Sundays?
Only at church?
Do you do it at your bedside or on the treadmill?

But let's forget setting.
What I'm more interested in is: in what *manner* do you pray?
Let me put this another way: *how* do you speak to God?
Because that's what prayer is: *speaking* to God.

Do you do it reverently?
With respect.
Using your big, best words.
Like you would if you were going to a tea-party with the Queen of England.
You'd begin by clearing your throat beforehand.
Maybe you'd practice too, looking in a mirror.
You certainly wouldn't drawl or use slang or cuss.
And you'd pepper your conversation with lots of, "Oh yes, ma'm"s, and be gratuitously, *grovelingly* polite.
And that would be appropriate, right?
For her because she's the beloved sovereign of 16 nations, and for *Him* because He's the Creator of all things, the Alpha and the Omega [Rev. 1:8], killer of primeval sea-monsters [Ps. 74:14], and the general of angelic armies [Jer. 29:17]. The very one who sustains life and time and reality itself [Col. 1:17]...and who will, as we hear in today's gospel-reading, suspend it all in darkness, snuffing out even the stars. [Pause.]

Of course, with *those* truths in mind, *maybe* you speak to Him in a nervous murmur, and quickly as you can(!), afraid of exhausting His patience and not really wanting to be the object of His (fearsome) scrutiny, so you rush the whole thing.

Or maybe you talk in a calm, easy way, mindful of Jesus' reassurance that God loves you as a kind-hearted, attentive father; someone who can be yourself with, and speak your mind to. Disagree with, even.

Well, Isaiah does all three in just *one* paragraph.
This calamity, you see, that has taken place - "The Exile" - has him *torn* in a

number of different directions.

He praises God.

And he *blames* God: 'you hid yourself', he says, pointing an accusatory finger at the Lord. 'Why didn't you intervene?' "Where were you?"

And for some of his contemporaries they just couldn't get over what seemed like a betrayal.

Have you ever felt like that?

Disappointed with God?

Let down.

I know you have.

So, what do you do with that...feeling?

For some it *festers* and grows.

It consumes them; poisons their faith.

And, sure enough, Isaiah mentions that there were those around him, sitting, strewn, along the banks of the (great) rivers of Babylon, impoverished, adrift, who ceased to 'call on [their Creator]' - to, in other words, pray to Him, acknowledge Him, center their lives on Him. And this is corroborated by the Psalmist in number 137, who paints this poignant, *heartbreaking* image of former worshippers hanging up their instruments in the branches of trees, abandoning them like garbage for the crows. [v.2]

And, just for a moment, you might imagine that the prophet could join them.

Then, suddenly, he changes direction: "Yet..." he begins. "Yet..." He just can't! "You are our potter," he cries. "And we are clay." Clay!

What's that?

Mud.

Dirt.

And this realization shifts his whole perspective.

Who am I to complain?

But notice that Isaiah doesn't resort to platitudes and cliches to explain away the dreadful predicament he's in. He doesn't say, "Oh, it's all part of a divine plan." Or, "The Lord moves in mysterious ways."

Rather, he theologises, the defeat and capture of the Jewish people is because - and this is a *key* verse - they'd been 'delivered...into the hand of [their] iniquity', which is to say that this disaster was the "organic" outcome of behaviour and choices *willingly* made. The tragedy wasn't inflicted from without: it emerged from within.

And this is a terribly important insight.

Sin is bad not because God has *decreed* it so, but because, objectively, it wrecks and ruins.

But God can't abide that.

He treasures His creation too much to allow our *wrecking and ruining* to continue indefinitely, and one day He'll stop it. 'Beware, [therefore and] keep alert, for you do not know when'.

Footnote:

1. See: Bill T. Arnold, H. G. M. Williamson (Eds.), *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*, Downers Grove, I. L.: InterVarsity Press, p. 484.