

Sermon: 2019/01/13 (1st Sunday after Epiphany - Baptism of Our Lord, Year C), *Isaiah 43:1-7; Psalm 29; Acts 8:14-17; and, Luke 3:15-17,21-22_BTR*

[Invite children to the front. Have a square of origami paper ready and see this link: <https://www.origamiway.com/origami-dove.shtml>]

[Silently show the (unfolded) paper to the congregation.]

Have you ever been baptized?

Yeah?

When? [Begin the first fold. And continue.]

[Wait for response.]

Why?

Why do Christians baptise?

Well, between our *Luke* and *Acts* readings we learn that there are two "parts" - two *reasons*:

One, for the 'forgiveness of sins' - we're going to say that in just a few minutes when we recite the "Nicene Creed."

It is the "mechanism" that God has commanded we use to experience the new start (in life) He offers - washing away all our mistakes and embarrassments. But Jesus didn't need that did He?

No!

He was perfect.

He never sinned.

So, *why*, then, did He ask John the Baptist to baptise Him?

Let me tell you:

For the *other* thing - the *person* - that we all *really* need: "the Holy Spirit" to create in us a new humanity, which is fit for Heaven. ["Swoop" down the finished "dove" onto the nearest child's head.]

Let's pray: Father God, ..., in Jesus' name, amen.

[Ask children to leave.]

I'd like us to consider - together - Isaiah's words (to us) this morning. You saw (on the insert) - that they were derived from the beginning of chapter forty-three, which 'a good percentage' of both 'conservatives *and* critical scholars' agree were spoken to a Jewish audience *in captivity* - 'by the rivers of Babylon'. [Boney M.] [n.1]

And this is a significant detail to keep in view:

Isaiah lived a very long life - I mentioned that last week (to the children) - sooo(!) long that he not only saw the throne of Judah - that was the (remaining) "rump" of David's kingdom - exchange hands a good number of times - by a bloody palace-coup to Uzziah who (then) died of 'a leprous disease', [2 Chron. 25:27, 26:19,21] and then, in straightforwardly dynastic fashion, to his son, his son's son, and his son's son's son, Hezekiah; but also - personally - witnessed *and experienced* the successful siege of Jerusalem by the Babylonian army of King Nebuchadnezzar in 589 B. C.

Isaiah doesn't - in his own book - describe the event.

Why?

Was it too harrowing?

Too dreadful to re-live (a second time) by recording it in ink on parchment?

We don't know.

I think that not wanting to revisit the trauma if only in his mind seems like a plausible reason to "skip" over it in his writing:

Thus, we find that - at the end of chapter thirty-nine - there is this unexpected and very obvious abrupt change of direction in the text, occasioned by this strange, sinister episode where Isaiah mentions 'envoys' arriving from Babylon, and, in his enthusiasm to receive distinguished, exotic guests, King Hezekiah gives them a grand tour of his kingdom, saying to the prophet - with whom he was close - "'They have seen all that is in my house; there is nothing in my storehouses that I did not show them.'" [v.1-4]

Well, this was waving a jewelled-encrusted "red flag" to a greedy bull - an ambitious, imperialistic bull.

And, suddenly, in the next chapter - forty - Isaiah is no longer in his home-country, but now an impoverished, melancholic exile living a hand-to-mouth existence in a foreign country, and attempting to console those around him with "comfortable" words about a future time when God would 'ransom' them, and 'bring' them '[back] from the west' 'from far away' - all phrases from today's passage; [Is. 43:3,5,6].

Things, then, have gone *badly* wrong for Israel:

they survived the Assyrian onslaught of Sennacherib - I mentioned that last time, only to be consumed a generation later by another empire from more-or-less the *same* region - what is now Iraq/Iran.

And much of what Isaiah has to say, is about how this calamity was well-deserved

- about how idolatry and injustice and not obeying the Commandments made the victory of the Babylonians inevitable. About how having fancy, expensive things invites their theft; about, principally, how showing disrespect to God has consequences - painful, uncomfortable consequences.

And I argue that we should expect to experience them too.
Because God wants relationship with us - He made us; we are His.

But not just *any* kind of relationship:

It is an extremely unequal one after all!

Think on our *Psalms*.

You heard that 'the Lord sits enthroned', that His 'glory thunders': [v.10 & 3].

That His voice 'splits the flames of fire' [v.7] - which sounds a lot to me like the moment God initiated "The Big Bang," when He said 'Let there be light' [Gen. 1:3]

- and 'all known matter and energy and space and time' - which had been 'squeezed together in unimaginable density...at temperatures of many trillion degrees' - then, *suddenly(!)*, flew outward at dazzling speed to make everything - including you and me. [n.2]

When I reflect on that - especially when I'm self-critical - I see that *right* relationship with the Creator is one *only* grounded in 'worship' (of Him) [v.2b] - not in excuses or in half-heartedness or in indifference.

And I see too that for those who (really) "*get it*" - that those who do respond to God *appropriately* - that is, with reverence and awe - which is what, ultimately, the Psalm was all about - they are a people rightly 'set apart' [Gen. 49:26b / Ex. 8:22 / Deut. 10:8 / 1 Chron. 23:13] - "set apart" for a different kind of experience of God.

It is these people - and only these people - that God calls 'my sons' [Is. 43:6], my 'children'.

Not all of humanity.

For Christians and Jews-living-by-faith - Enoch, Abraham, Moses, etc. - for "The Elect" - He will, Isaiah tells us - *twice*, 'exchange' '[other] nations': [v.3 & 4].

And although I'm uncomfortable to call this "favouritism" - which might imply *unjust* partiality, and I don't mean that - but God does *favour* some people - a people - more than others.

This truth *pervades* the Scriptures; it is on nearly every page.

And to them alone - to that *holy* group - He lavishes *better* gifts - *richer* blessings - such as - in particular - an eternal home.

Unequal treatment vis-a-vis the Afterlife doesn't mean *unfair* treatment.

Or less care for some group versus another.

I treat my wife and my daughter *very* differently.

And it is the direct outcome of one's attitude toward a God whose reality is "beautiful" and breathtaking: [Ps. 29:2].

But if this makes you squirm - this Biblical reality, consider this:
Imagine, for a moment, that you are an astronaut; an astronaut on a lonely spaceship, cruising through the vast blackness of space.
You are, in fact, the captain; the pilot.
On the outside you're a military-man; a warrior; a veteran.
Tall, handsome; muscular.
But on the inside, you're a "softie" - a "teddy-bear."
With you on this voyage is your crew.
And they've been travelling with you for *many*, hard years.
You know each one of them intimately; you genuinely *love* them - and find something to like and appreciate about *each* member.
And you're all that there is:
The people on this spaceship are the only hope for civilization; for art and music and community; and against you is the savagery and callousness of the universe.
But some of your crew are ill-disciplined, prone to violence and thievery; to lying and to angry tantrums.
They seem beyond reason; incapable of lasting compromise.
How long would you tolerate them?
Would you take them with you to "Earth 2?"
(*Your oxygen and resources are finite.*)
Or would you quietly slip them out of an air-lock along the way?

'Ascribe to the Lord, you gods, ascribe to the Lord glory and strength. Ascribe to the Lord the glory due His name'.[\[Ps. 29:1-2\]](#)

Let's take a moment to reflect.

Footnotes:

1. Smith, Gary V. (December 2011), 'Isaiah 40-55: Which Audience was Addressed?', *The Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society*, Volume 54, No. 4, pp. 701-713, 701.
2. Brown, Cynthia Stokes (2008), *Big History: From the Big Bang to the Present*, New York, N. Y.: The New Press, 4.