

THE BACK OF THE BULLETIN

In You I Will Be Glorified

The Lord said to me, You are my Servant, in whom I shall be glorified. What do the Second Isaiah's mysterious words mean? How does a *servant* glorify his Master?

Does God Mean The Prophet?

These servant-songs of Isaiah sometimes look like the calling of a prophet. But I don't believe Isaiah could be speaking of himself. God never gives prophets any kind of *title* in such descriptions. What is more, prophets are called quietly, in private intimacy, and these songs are announced in public, like the Baptism of Jesus: *This is my Son, my Beloved, on whom my favour rests!* They are much more like the proclaiming of a King. So perhaps that would explain why the Servant is to bring glory to God; his life will witness before the earth that *God is with us*, because God will lead him to victory and honour.

We Are In Exile

I wonder what the people thought, when they first heard this oracle. They were in Babylon, exiled from home; they knew that their King, and his royal line, had been brutally exterminated: it would take some kind of miracle, a heavenly visitation, to redeem their fortunes. Did they think of Isaiah as an inspired prophet, and obediently lift up their heads in expectation? I doubt it very much. People in trouble are divided in mind between hope and despair, and without some hope we'd turn our faces to the wall. But let someone stand up and nail his hopeful colours to the mast: you can guarantee that his fellow-sufferers will shower him with scorn, and bitterly remind him of the hopelessness of their situation.

So What, In Fact, Happened?

What happened was that Babylon, the most powerful nation in the Middle East, the regional superpower which had dominated Judah for a century and more, *collapsed* overnight without a single sword being drawn. Cyrus, king of Persia, simply walked through the gates of the city and took it. The heir of Nebuchadnezzar made a noise like a hoop and rolled away into history; and shortly afterwards the Jews were absorbing the amazing news that they were going home to a Jerusalem all of them had sung songs about, but most had never actually seen. I am afraid the reality, when they returned to it,

was not what they had been expecting. The hill of Zion was unprotected by the mighty walls of which they had heard, the famous Temple a desolation of ruined stonework. The population, such as it was, consisted of a few ancient squatters and survivors. "The streets were not paved with gold; they were not even paved; they had to pave them." It is instructive to see the hardship of re-founding the state of Iraq in our own day, and to note the surprise of the Americans, that the project of a liberal Western democracy is proving so hard a sell in Baghdad. The ruin of Jerusalem and Judah was not something to be wished away in a night. The wounds were too serious by half.

The Prophetic Hope of Isaiah

What always impresses me is the amazing attitude of Isaiah towards Gentiles. The hatred of the West which so surprises us in Iraq is, when you think about it, quite understandable. So why doesn't Isaiah hate the Gentiles, who destroyed his homeland and deported his people, burnt his Temple and dishonoured his faith? Why does he respond with the offer of divine favour, *so that my salvation may reach the ends of the earth?* The answer is revealing. The favour of God is extended to all who live, and not just to one nation. This is the true glory of God, his justice, to which the prophet must bear witness. The carrying of this message into the human community is the work of the Servant of God. The task is enormous, and its fulfilment will be miraculous. I feel certain that Isaiah did not think he could accomplish it himself. "The Servant" is someone greater than the prophet, a figure who stands between earth and heaven, the ultimate and sufficient mediator between God and us. It's hard to discern what Isaiah thought he would be like. But he knew the scale of the task he would have to do, and this is what he describes in the Servant Songs.

Servant And Son

The strands of meaning that we read in these ancient visions are all gathered and fulfilled in the figure of Jesus Christ. He knew these writings; I think he adopted them reverently, as his own personal instructions from the Father. He gave three decades of meditation to discern what they meant, and three years of sacrifice to fulfil them. *Fr Philip*