

Sunday Next Before Advent

“and they shall dwell in their own land” (Lesson for the Epistle).

We rarely have readings set from the Old Testament, so it seems best to tackle them when we do have them. You might not know the interpretative rule stated in the 39 Articles: “they are not to be heard, which feign that the old Fathers did look only for transitory promises” on the grounds that “both in the Old and New Testament everlasting life is offered to Mankind by Christ”. Now it is a fascinating study to try to find out what the original meaning of a passage, or a whole book, was – but that does not exhaust the meaning. To keep a book in use, to read it as an “oracle of God” after its original context has passed, is automatically to give it additional meanings. We can see this happening in Daniel 9.2, where Jeremiah is made the subject of study, and indeed it happens in today's reading, because “they shall no more say” reflects on passages such as Exodus 20.2 (the Ten Commandments).

So we may start with the transitory promises, because that is what we can see on the face of the text and they were (nearly) fulfilled. The history can be outlined. There seemed to be the beginnings of a restored kingdom in the early years of Darius under a man of royal descent, Zerubbabel, with some ingathering of the scattered people. Then nothing more is heard of him, and the restoration more or less stagnates. You can find traces of this in Ezra 5 and in Zechariah 4 (but you will probably need the aid of a modern commentary). The preservation in use of both Jeremiah and Zechariah (and similarly of the unknown writer of Isaiah 40-55) indicates that the hope remained even after the apparently glorious prospects had led to so small a result. One might think that something of the same pattern existed when the Maccabees created an independent Jewish kingdom in the second century BC – but that hope of the transitory promises led straight to Herod!

So there is a pattern in the Old Testament, of a transitory promise which may indeed have a small-scale fulfilment, but where much is left over. This pattern is in fact very widespread. All the Land is promised – and yet there are many previous inhabitants not driven out. A wide area is promised – and yet only a narrower area is (more or less) secured. Prosperity and security are not (normally) on the scale promised. Both political and religious division are endemic. Almost always in the Old Testament there is a gap between hope and experience, and therefore a future promise.

Now Old Testament theologians were not blind. They could see that historical events tended to be better or worse, but not decisive. So the choice comes to be between a kind of practical despair, such as we find in the book called Ecclesiastes (which should be read in the week before this Sunday at Morning and Evening Prayer, so it is much in my mind), and a hope which has gone beyond transitory promises into a decisive intervention, a “Day of the Lord”. We first find that term in Amos, but I don't know what he, or his hearers, thought it meant. It comes to mean the end of history, the resolution of crisis – a complete new beginning, a new earth under God's rule. So “vanity of vanities, all is vanity” or the “Day of the Lord” - there is no middle course.

These speculations were current in Jesus' time. Indeed, one major feature of those speculations, the Resurrection, is so fundamental to Christianity that without it there is indeed nothing but vanity. Since the future hope passes without any evidence of dispute into the thinking of the early church, we do well to assume that Jesus countenanced it, as he certainly taught the Resurrection, and in that sense the future hope remains. But that is not the whole story.

Jesus himself – as “the Resurrection and the Life” makes a difference – that should be obvious. If Christianity cannot exist without future hope, it certainly exists in a “not yet”. The Epistle to the Hebrews (chapter 2) summarises the situation. There is a promise – not just for Israel but indeed for Man generally – and it is not yet fulfilled in us. But it has been fulfilled in Jesus, who has passed through the crisis, indeed through death itself, and has tasted death for all men so that we can with him can inherit the promises.

Honesty requires us to recognise that the Old Testament starts in transitory promises. But study of the history of Old Testament (and Intertestamental) theology shows that the meaning is not trapped in its beginning. There is a hope generated, which leads through Jesus and his death, and the end is indeed “everlasting life offered to Mankind by Christ”.

The lesson for the Epistle is Jeremiah 23.5-8