

## **Rich feast in Lent?**

*Isaiah 55:1-9, Luke 13:1-9*

*24 March 2019*

How would you feel if you received an invitation to a party with the enticing promise that you could have free water?! You would not think too much of it, would you? Unless, of course you lived in a country which permanently struggles with lack of clean, fresh water due to inadequate infrastructure, or water shortages caused by draught, or some natural disaster. But this is how the prophet Isaiah addresses the exiled Israelites in Babylon in our first Scripture reading. At least, this is what it sounds like as we listen to the words. And straight away we are tempted to sit back and feel, yes, we know what this is all about. Of course for the poor, exploited, and harshly treated exiles, this must have been good news, a welcome call, especially if you read further and gather that some bread and milk and even a little wine is also thrown in to tempt them to come to the party.

But, what has it got to do with us? Thank God, these are not our immediate concerns. We are OK for food and drink – and much beside. And, in any case, why are we talking about parties, when this is Lent, which is traditionally a time of fasting and self-discipline and the only ‘party’ we are invited to is our church’s Annual General Meeting, which follows this service?

Well, there are a few things to be said about this text, which may dislodge our assumptions, and challenge our first impressions of what’s going on in this reading and why it may, after all, be quite a suitable reading for Lent. So let’s begin with the person, who issues God’s invitation to the people. He is generally known as The Prophet Isaiah. But those, who know about these things, are telling us, and I am sure some of you have heard it before, that, in fact, there are, at least three different people who took part in the writing of this book. And it was only the later editors, who brought them together under one heading. Now, this is only interesting for us, because these ‘three Isaiahs’ all wrote at different times, had different styles of writing and had different messages to the people in their successive historical contexts.

Our passage comes from the second of the three ‘Isaiahs’. This is the prophet who was active nearly a 100 years later than the person, who gave his name to the Book and was responsible for the

first part of it. The time when this ‘second Isaiah’ wrote dates back to the last days of the exile, when the prophet was able to look forward to the much more liberal rule of the Persian King Cyrus. Cyrus allowed and encouraged the Jewish exiles to return to their home, to resume their national life, and rebuild their temple in Jerusalem. The overall message of this prophet is a note of hope and encouragement as he declares to the deportees that their punishment is over and with God’s gracious forgiveness they can and should be on their way home. This is, indeed, good news, no wonder it is called ‘the Gospel of the OT’. It is given in a tender, poetic language, which makes it the most lyrical part of the whole of the Jewish Bible. And it contains the so-called ‘Servant Songs’, which have been the likely inspiration for Jesus and have remained so for the Christian Church ever since.

Looking at the people to whom the invitation comes, we may have to modify our original assumptions. In the main, these were not poor, exploited people devoid of all freedom, whom we cannot relate to at all. We know that the ones who were taken into exile in the first place were the elite of the Jerusalem society, well-educated, well-to-do people who were given considerable freedom in Babylon. By this time they were well settled there, they raised families, could own land, had flourishing businesses. They could take part in royal projects and serve in the military and practice their religion freely. And on top of that, this was now the second and third generation of exiles, most of whom never seen Jerusalem before, and only knew it from the stories of the old generation, who were no longer around. So, the call to go ‘home’ and have a party of ‘free water and bread’ may have been as uninviting to them, as it would be to us.

But there was more to the invitation – and this is why it is not a million miles from our Lenten reflections. The place these Israelites were invited back to, was no longer a ‘land flowing with milk and honey’ as the ancients may have described the Promised Land to their children and grandchildren. After the successive wars and invasions it was an unruly wreck of a place, partly taken over by neighbouring tribes. So, the relatively well-off exiles are called to leave their comfortable, settled existence with not too many obvious needs and go back to this rocky, barren, neglected, desert-like land with no ready material resources for a comparable way of life. And no Temple to worship in.

It was only a fortnight ago or so, that in our Lenten journey we followed Jesus into the wilderness and learnt how essential this experience was to him in understanding and shaping his future ministry filled and guided by the Holy Spirit. For Jesus this was a time of preparation, for the Israelites and for us it is a call in our comfort and plenty to face the wilderness of others and find ways of building with them a joint future, a joint world, where the God of every nation can fulfill all our needs.

We have all heard about the devastating effects of Cyclone Idai in Mozambique and in the neighbouring countries. As the Aid Agencies are describing their immediate task, it seems they have to start with actually building the roads to the cut-off places where most of the help is needed, before they can do anything else. The prophet in our reading has the same, daring vision. The people are not called into a ready-made party, a better, more comfortable situation. What they are promised though, is the same close and intimate relationship with God that was the nourishment for their ancestors, Abraham, Moses and David. And within that relationship their co-operation is also enlisted for organising the party themselves. Not just bring your own chairs and cutlery, but build the banquet hall as well as the road that leads to it, because the location is a bit sparse as it is.

This is a true Lenten challenge: it is beyond giving up some food or games for a time, beyond even entering the wilderness for some self-examination, worthy though these projects may be. It is hearing God's call, who has a greater project in mind: *the transformation of the wilderness itself* into a flourishing, habitable place, which means life for everybody. It is an invitation to a seemingly uninviting place, but a place heavy with the presence of God, who wants all creation to be part of the divine abundance. It is the enormous privilege of working with this God. Working with all we've got, all we can offer to build a glorious future for all the nations.

The call, as we read, goes out to all who are in need of water, and of course, we may still think that, it is probably not for us, because we do not feel particularly thirsty. But, it is said that it is possible to be thirsty without actually realising it. I have been reading about the experiences of people living in the southwestern United States, where the humidity is so low and the perspiration evaporates so quickly, that you can get dehydrated even without noticing it,

without feeling thirsty. Apparently, in the Grand Canyon National Park there are strategically placed signs with the warning: "Stop! Drink water. You are thirsty, whether you realise it or not".

Once we know that in our passage water is a metaphor for spiritual richness of life lived in the presence of God, we can imagine finding these same signs on the way of our Lenten journey. Stop, you may not be aware but you have wandered away from God, you have lost the excitement of being part of God's amazing project, your life is badly in need of being re-invigorated. Come for fresh water!

And for the final word we turn again to the Cyclone-battered Mozambique. When a national leader of the country was interviewed on the radio, he was asked what might follow after this devastation. He acknowledged that at this stage it was difficult to think of the next step. But he was brave enough and prophetic enough to say that the rebuilding could not simply be the reconstruction of how things were before. That these are now different times in which different kinds of lives are being lived and this requires a different kind of infrastructure.

This chimes well with Isaiah's message. The returning exiles are not called to come back to reproduce either the ancient past known from stories of old, or to carry on with their relatively comfortable living in Babylon. They are called to fundamentally re-focus their lives, to become co-workers in God's ongoing re-building project and to live God's dream for them of a fruitful life, of being an example and a blessing for all nations. I cannot think of a better programme for Lent, or indeed for the rest of our lives. **Amen**

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