

The Prophet Isaiah & the promised Messiah

Who was Isaiah?

Part of the answer to this question is in Isaiah, chapter 6, verses 1-8:

1	Tað árið ið Uzzias kongur doyði, sá eg Harran sita í ógvuliga høgum háseti, og sleip kápu Hansara fylti templið.
2	Serafar stóðu rundan um Hann; seks veingir hevði hvør; við tveimum fjaldi hann andlitið, við tveimum fjaldi hann føturnar, og við tveimum fleyg hann.
3	Og teir róptu hvør til annan: "Heilagur, heilagur, heilagur er HARRIN Gud herskaranna - øll jørðin er full av dýrd Hansara!"
4	Grundin undir durastøvunum skalv, tá ið rópið ljóðaði, og húsið fylltist av royki.
5	Tá segði eg: "Vei mær, tað er úti við mær! Tí eg eri maður við óreinum vørrum, og eg búgvi mitt í fólki við óreinum vørrum - og nú hava eygu míni sæð kongin, HARRAN Gud herskaranna!"
6	Men ein serafurin fleyg yvir til mín; í hondini hevði hann glóð, sum hann við klova hevði tikið av altarinum;
7	við henni nam hann við munn mín og segði: "Hygg, hetta hevur nomið við varrar tínar - skyld tín er burtur, og bøtt er fyri synd tína!"
8	So hoyrði eg HARRAN siga: "Hvønn skal Eg senda, hvør vil bera boð fyri Okkum?" Og eg svaraði: "Her eri eg - send meg!"

In the year King Uzziah died, I saw the Lord seated on a high and lofty throne, with the train of his garment filling the temple.

Seraphim were stationed above; each of them had six wings: with two they covered their faces, with two they covered their feet, and with two they hovered. One cried out to the other: 'Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts! All the earth is filled with his glory.'

At the sound of that cry, the frame of the door shook and the house was filled with smoke.

Then I said, 'Woe is me, I am doomed! For I am a man of unclean lips, living among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the LORD of hosts!'

Then one of the seraphim flew to me, holding an ember which he had taken with tongs from the altar.

He touched my mouth with it. 'See', he said, 'now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.'

Then I heard the voice of the Lord saying, 'Whom shall I send? Who will go for us?' 'Here I am', I said; 'send me!'

We can tell when Isaiah was appointed as a prophet in the Temple in Jerusalem, because King Uzziah died in 742 BC. My guess is that he was a young man who was born between 780 and 760 BC. We also know that Isaiah's time as a prophet ended in the year 701 BC, when Sennacherib besieged Jerusalem. In the years 722 and 721 the Northern part of what we now call Israel had fallen, too.

The Book of Isaiah is really three books. Chapters 1 to 39 were composed by the person who had the vision of God in the Temple. Chapters 40 to 55 are called *Second Isaiah* or *Deutero-Isaiah*, who was a prophet towards the end of the time when the people of Israel were in exile in Babylon. Chapters 56 to 66 are called *Third Isaiah* or *Trito-Isaiah*, which was definitely composed after the return of the people of Israel from their exile in Babylon. The first exile began in 597 BC, and it was completed in 586. The return was also not a smooth single event, but happened between 538 and 516 BC. For a comparison of dates between the prophets, Jeremiah was active from 627 until about 585 BC, Ezekiel was active between 593 and 571 BC - in other words, at the time of the exile. Haggai and Zecharias appeared after the exiles had come home, later in the 6th century BC.

The dates and places are important, because they tell us something we should never forget with the Bible. The Bible is not one book, but many books written in very different styles. As well as that, some of the parts of the Bible that we call 'a book', like Isaiah, are in fact more than one, like Isaiah, which is really three. The fact that second and third Isaiah were written during and after the exile means the original Isaiah could not possibly have been alive any more. The reason we know that the second and third parts were written so much later is that they refer to historical events which took place a very long time after the first part of what we call the Book of Isaiah was written. The key fact is that the prophets spoke in real situations, because *God does not speak to us in a vacuum*. The prophets speak on God's behalf in a certain time and place. God has something to say in every time and place. We really ought to ask ourselves from time to time what God has to say about our time, our place. Perhaps people have already spoken to us on behalf of God and we did not recognise them.

As we have already heard at the beginning of Advent, we need to be wide awake!

Reflection 1. Isaiah 6

Isaiah was overcome by the splendour and the majesty of the Lord. In the presence of God, he realised what a miserable, sinful human being he was. What could reduce the distance between him and God? The seraph came bearing a purifying coal and this burned away, or purged, Isaiah's sinfulness and unworthiness.

Can you sympathise with him? I can. The sisters, Deacon Christian and priests like Father Paul Marx and me are supposed to do a retreat every year. In some languages a retreat is called 'spiritual exercises'. One of the hardest things when I go on retreat is to calm down and simply be there in the presence of God. The busy routines I have had in other times of my life have made it very easy to avoid direct contact with God. It is a bit like avoiding eye-contact with someone you would rather speak to at another time, or perhaps you just want to avoid getting into a conversation or even an argument. It can be like that with me and God - I can find all sorts of excuses for thinking about other things, important things, or I can politely sit down and smile at God and see if God smiles back; I can close my eyes and rest. I can listen, perhaps by reading the Word of God in the Bible and spending time thinking or praying about it. I can bombard God with my requests, probably not asking anything for myself, but still definitely praying *for* something.

When I am finally able just to sit quietly or kneel down or even prostrate myself on the floor - it's a strange sight but it does happen, usually in private - there is no way to avoid God, and then I begin to experience what Isaiah experienced in the Temple. Then it is just me and God.

When it is just me and God, I can sometimes just feel immense peace or comfort, but at other times I can be very uncomfortable, because on those occasions I am aware that there is a huge gap between God and me, just as Isaiah felt: 'I am a man of unclean lips living among a people of unclean lips, and my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts'. That gap seems deep and wide, as if it will never be possible to go to the other side and come close to God.

But notice what happens in the Temple. Isaiah was contemplating his unhappy situation; 'woe is me', he says; 'I am doomed'. It was when he was convinced that his unclean lips were such an obstacle to being close to God that the seraph came with a burning coal and touched them with it; then he said 'See: now that this has touched your lips, your wickedness is removed, your sin purged.' It means that it can be a little bit painful for God to remove our sin, but if we let Him do it, we shall be much happier. What is most important in this story is that it was God who took the initiative. It means that when we are tempted to think that we are doomed to stay far from God, God can suddenly come very close. It seems that God wants to be close to us. The seraph is an angel - in Greek it is an ἄγγελος (angelos), a messenger (sometimes the message itself), and the message this seraph brought Isaiah was, 'no matter how wicked you are, I have a job for you. I can heal your wickedness'. That message is for us, too. God is saying to you and me, 'I can heal your wickedness; I can sort you out.'

Messianic Prophecies in the First Part of Advent 2020

The readings from the Old Testament used at Mass each day in the first part of Advent (until 16 December) are mostly prophecies, or often promises, about the coming Messiah.

Here are the ones we hear on the Sundays of Advent this year (2020)

1. Sunnudag/Sunday 1 - Esaias/Isaiah 63, 16-17; 64, 1,3-8

	Tú, HARRI, ert faðir okkara; "Frelsari okkara frá ævunum", tað er navn Títt.
17	Hví letur Tú okkum villast burt av leiðum Tínum, HARRI? Hví herðir Tú hjarta okkara, so tað óttast Teg ikki? Hugsa um tænarar Tínar og vend við aftur, um ættirnar, ið eru arvalutur Tín!
1	Hevði Tú viljað skrætt sundur himmalin og komið niður, so fjøllini skulvu fyrri ásjón Tíni, eins og eldur fær turrar greinar at loga og vatn at kóka - til at kunngjørt óvinum Tínum navn Títt og noytt fólkini at skelva fyrri ásjón Tíni,
3	Frá gamlari tíð hevur jú eingin spurt ella hoyrt, hevur einki eyga sæð nakran annan Gud enn Teg gera slíkt fyrri tey, sum bíða eftir Honum.
4	Tú kemur ímóti teimum, sum gera rættvísi við gleði, teimum, ið minnst Teg á leiðum Tínum. Men Tú vart vreiður, og vit syndaðu - so hevur staðið við, og kundu vit tá verða frelst!
5	Vit vórðu sum hin óreini øll somul, og øll rættvísi okkara varð sum dálkað plagg; sum leyvið fólkaðu vit øll, og misgerðir okkara høvdu okkum avstað fyrri sær sum vindurin.
6	Og eingin er, sum kallar á navn Títt, sum mennir seg upp at halda fast við Teg; tí Tú hevur fjalt ásjón Tína fyrri okkum og latið okkum tærast burt av misgerðum okkara.
7	Men nú, HARRI! Tú ert Faðir okkara; vit eru leirið, og Tú ert tann, ið evnar okkum til - handaverk Títt eru vit øll somul.
8	HARRI, ver ikki so út av lagi vreiður, minst ikki til ævigar tíðir misgerð! Nei, minst til, at vit eru fólk Títt øll somul!

You, Lord, yourself are our Father,
'Our Redeemer' is your ancient name.
Why, Lord, leave us to stray from your ways
and harden our hearts against fearing you?
Return, for the sake of your servants,
the tribes of your inheritance.
Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down!
– at your Presence the mountains would melt.
No ear has heard,
no eye has seen
any god but you act like this
for those who trust him.
You guide those who act with integrity
and keep your ways in mind.
You were angry when we were sinners;
we had long been rebels against you.
We were all like men unclean,
all that integrity of ours like filthy clothing.
We have all withered like leaves
and our sins blew us away like the wind.
No one invoked your name
or roused himself to catch hold of you.
For you hid your face from us
and gave us up to the power of our sins.
And yet, Lord, you are our Father;
we the clay, you the potter,
we are all the work of your hand.

Reflection on Isaiah 63/64

This reading, which we heard on the first Sunday of Advent, is from *Third Isaiah*, from the time when the Israelites were back home after their exile in Babylon. Something is not quite right. Through the prophet's words, God is helping the people of Israel to recognise that they are straying from His ways. Just like us, when we try to avoid having eye-contact with God, the people are hardening their hearts so that they can ignore what God wants. It is as if God had gone away, and in the second verse (verse 17 of chapter 63) the prophet pleads, on behalf of the people: 'return, for the sake of your servants, the tribes of your inheritance'.

The next verse (chapter 64, verse 1) is really powerful: "Oh, that you would tear the heavens open and come down!" Here the prophet is interpreting what the people of Israel want. He makes it sound as if they are desperate to see God among them.

Do you see what has happened in the space of just a few lines? The prophet is saying that the people are desperate to have God with them, because while God is far away in heaven, it is easier for them to forget all that God has ever asked them to do and to be. The way *Third Isaiah* has put these verses together starts

with a confession that God's chosen people are beginning to go astray, and the next moment it is almost God's fault: "well, if you are not here among us, how can we possibly do what you want?"

What do you think about that idea, that God's absence causes problems for us?

The rest of the passage we heard on the first Sunday of Advent repeats this, but in detail. First of all, the prophet says that the God of Israel is the only god who behaves in this way. This was in a region where there were many gods, and the people had been exiled for about seventy years from the Temple in Jerusalem; they had often been commanded to worship other gods. Now they are home, and the prophet is quietly rejoicing, but in an unusual way. He speaks for the people when he says in verse 4 of chapter 64 that God was "angry when we were sinners". I am not sure how to translate the Faroese, but in the English text the next words are "we had long been rebels against you"; he goes on in verse 5 to confess that "we have all withered like leaves and our sins blew us away like the wind". Once again, the prophet feels able to say in verse 6 that it is because God hid His face that the people no longer called on God's name. In verse 7 we read some words that have become very familiar to some of us, where the prophet calls God the potter and says we are the clay: "we are all the work of your hand".

I think verses 4, 5, 6 & 7 are a very precious piece of Scripture; I wonder what each of you will find in it. Do you think the prophet is trying to entice God to be closer to the people, or do you think he is really trying to help the people to see how happy they should be to have God in their lives?

Maybe you see something quite different. Have another look.

2. Sunnudag/Sunday 2 - Esaias/Isaiah 40, 1-5,9-11

1	Troystið, troystið fólk Mítt! sigur Gud tykkara.
2	Talið milt við Jerúsalem og rópið til tað, at stríð tess er at enda, at skuld tess er goldin, at tað av hond HARRANS hevur fingið tvífalt fyri allar syndir sínar!
3	Hoyr! Ein er, sum rópar: "Gerið í oyðimørkini HARRANUM veg til reiðar! Javnið Gudi okkara vegin, har sum óbygt er!
4	Hvør dalur skal hækkast, og hvørt fjall og hvør hædd skal lækkast; heggjarnir skulu verða slætti, og hamrarnir flatlendi!
5	Dýrd HARRANS skal opinberast, og alt hold skal fáa tað at síggja - tí muður HARRANS hevur talað."

9	Far niðan á høggt fjall, tú gleðiboð Zions! Lyft upp rødd tína við kraft, tú gleðiboð Jerúsalems! Lat hana hoyrast, óttast ikki! Sig við býirnar í Juda: "Hyggið Gud tykkara!"
10	Ja, Harrin HARRIN kemur við veldi, og armur Hansara vísir mátt sín! - Og lön Sína hevur Hann við Sær, sigursfongur Hansara gongur undan Honum!
11	Sum hirði røktar Hann fylgi Sítt, í arm Sín savnar Hann lombini, og í favninum ber Hann tey; lambærnar leiðir Hann.

'Console my people, console them'
 says your God.
 'Speak to the heart of Jerusalem
 and call to her
 that her time of service is ended,
 that her sin is atoned for,
 that she has received from the hand of the Lord
 double punishment for all her crimes.'
 A voice cries, 'Prepare in the wilderness
 a way for the Lord.
 Make a straight highway for our God
 across the desert.
 Let every valley be filled in,
 every mountain and hill be laid low.
 Let every cliff become a plain,
 and the ridges a valley;
 then the glory of the Lord shall be revealed
 and all mankind shall see it;
 for the mouth of the Lord has spoken.'
 Go up on a high mountain,
 joyful messenger to Zion.
 Shout with a loud voice,
 joyful messenger to Jerusalem.
 Shout without fear,
 say to the towns of Judah,
 'Here is your God.'
 Here is the Lord coming with power,
 his arm subduing all things to him.
 The prize of his victory is with him,
 his trophies all go before him.
 He is like a shepherd feeding his flock,
 gathering lambs in his arms,
 holding them against his breast
 and leading to their rest the mother ewes.

Reflection on Isaiah 40

The reading we hear on the second Sunday is one of the most famous poems from the Bible. It is absolutely beautifully set to music in Handel's Oratorio *The Messiah*.

The first lines are unexpected words of joy. Why are they unexpected? Because these words were written in the time when the people of Israel were in exile under the domination of the Persian Empire, in Babylon, more or less where Baghdad is today. It seems that some battles never end in that part of the world.

Can you do an experiment? Imagine that you have been taken far from your homeland against your will, and forced to live in a foreign land and be dominated by another religion and another culture, as well as another language? Just think how these words would sound to people in that situation.

The first words given to the prophet are a command to console the people. They need that consolation, but imagine listening to a prophet telling you, in Iraq, that you and your people, the people of Israel, are no longer slaves; someone has already atoned for your sins. You have been punished. At least those last words would obviously make sense. You are being punished by this exile.

The words in verse 3 are very familiar to us, because we hear them every year: I am not sure what the second half of verse 3 says in Faroese, but in the English the whole verse says "A voice cries, 'prepare in the wilderness a way for the Lord. Make a straight highway across the desert'." What follows is almost a description of building a motorway from Baghdad to Jerusalem. Fill in the valleys - flatten the mountains - take the cliffs and the ridges away.

The command given to the people through the prophet Isaiah in verse 9 is to proclaim to the people of Judah "Here is your God". It is easier to grasp the full meaning of this if you realise that you can see most of Judah from Jerusalem, so the prophet is talking about the time when the exiles have built the highway across the desert so that they can go home to Jerusalem. Then they will be able to stand on Mount Zion, full of joy, and shout to the people in the surrounding area, 'we are back home. We can worship God here'.

How would you feel, as an exile, if you heard the prophet saying these words? Would it make you sad or happy? Would it be hard to hear them, because you are in exile, or would it encourage you to stay with your religion, to hang on to your faith in God, to be proud of belonging to the chosen People?

For me this section is bitter as well as sweet, but the last section, particularly verse 11, is very beautiful: in English it runs like this: "He is like a shepherd feeding his flock, gathering lambs in his arms, holding them against his breast and leading to their rest the mother ewes".

All of this is a promise. All of this is the future. How does it make an exile feel?

3. Sunnudag/Sunday 3 - Esaias/Isaiah 61, 1-2,10-11

1	Andi Harrans HARRANS er yvir Mær, av tí at HARRIN hevur salvað Meg at bera eyðmjúkum gleðið; Hann hevur sent Meg við grøðing til teirra, ið hava sundurbrotið hjarta, at boða fangum frælsi og bundnum, at tey skulu sleppa leys,
2	at kunngera náðiár HARRANS og hevndardag Guds okkara, at troysta øll, ið syrgja,
10	Eg gleðist stórliga í HARRANUM, sál mín skal fegnast í Gudi mínum; tí Hann hevur latið meg í búna frelsunnar; í kappi rættvísinnar hevur Hann sveipað meg - eins og táið brúðgómur setur á seg húgvu, vakra sum prestsins, og brúður pyntar seg við stási sínum.
11	Tí eins og jørðin letur vaksa upp nálir sínar, og eins og urtagarðurin letur fræ sítt spretta upp, so skal Harrin HARRIN lata rættferð og lovsong vaksa upp fyri eygum alra tjóða.

The spirit of the Lord has been given to me,
for the Lord has anointed me.
He has sent me to bring good news to the poor,
to bind up hearts that are broken;
to proclaim liberty to captives,
freedom to those in prison;
to proclaim a year of favour from the Lord.
'I exult for joy in the Lord,
my soul rejoices in my God,
for he has clothed me in the garments of salvation,
he has wrapped me in the cloak of integrity,
like a bridegroom wearing his wreath,
like a bride adorned in her jewels.
'For as the earth makes fresh things grow,
as a garden makes seeds spring up,
so will the Lord make both integrity and praise
spring up in the sight of the nations.

Reflection on Isaiah 61

The beginning of chapter 61 of the Book of Isaiah is what Jesus read out in the synagogue in Nazareth in chapter 4 of the Gospel of Luke. When He had finished reading it he rolled up the scroll, handed it to the attendant and sat down. All the people in the synagogue were staring at Him, and He said, "Today this scripture passage is fulfilled in your hearing" (Luke 4, 21). Jesus clearly thought that what Isaiah said was about Him. This is probably the clearest of all the Messianic prophecies about Jesus. We hear Isaiah's words on the Third Sunday of Advent: the reading is allocated deliberately to that day, which is meant to be a day of joy, *Gaudete* Sunday, when parishes with lots of vestments put the priest in a rose-coloured chasuble. The signs all point to this as an important text.

Originally, these words were written by *Third Isaiah*, in other words after the exile in Babylon. Once again, it is useful to imagine you are in Jerusalem, one of the chosen People of God who have been brought home and can once more worship your God in the Temple. How would these words sound to one of those people?

The reading is in two parts. Verses 1 and 2 are the ones which Jesus said referred to Him. Verses 10 and 11 are a poetic vision where the moral and religious life of the people will be as normal and regular as the cycle of nature.

Try not to be in Nazareth listening to Jesus, but in Jerusalem, listening to Isaiah Mark Three. He is making a serious claim: God's Spirit is upon him because God has anointed him; his task is to bring good news to poor people, to bind up broken hearts, to tell captives they are free, even those who are in prison, and to proclaim a special time of grace. What do you think when you hear his words? Is it easy to understand them? Is it easy to believe this man who claims to have been given this mission by God? If you can believe him, does his message give you hope? How does it make you feel?

The second part of the text we hear on the Third Sunday of Advent applies only to Isaiah. He is ecstatically happy, because God has clothed him in the garments of salvation and the cloak of integrity - as dazzling as a bridegroom or a bride. What really gives him joy, though, is what is going to happen next, as verse 11 puts it: 'For as the earth makes fresh things grow, as a garden makes seeds spring up, so will the Lord make both integrity and praise spring up in the sight of the nations.' This is one of those times where a member of the chosen People has a vision of the 'nations' (which means the Gentiles, non-Jews) sharing in the benefits of God revealing Himself. This means the Messiah is meant not only for the Jews, but for everyone. We need to be very careful if we ever talk to Jewish people about this prophecy or about the Messiah, but that should in no way make us question our belief that Jesus is the Messiah.

Catholics all over the globe will hear these texts from Isaiah this Advent. Do they help you as you prepare for the birth of Jesus? Or are they still mysterious? What do they say to you, in your heart, as you move forward on your journey into the mystery of God?