

November 19, 2006

First Sunday of Advent

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Among the themes that unify the Book of Isaiah, one of the more notable is that of Jerusalem, or the roughly synonymous "Zion," the city of God. The names "Jerusalem" and "Zion" appear ninety-seven times in Isaiah. From the very first verse of that book, this prophecies have to do with "Judah and Jerusalem" (1:1; 2:1; 3:1,8, etc.). Arguably more than any of the other prophets, Isaiah was the prophet of Jerusalem.

We may have suspected this would be the case, because it was in Jerusalem that Isaiah received his prophetic vocation (6:1). Indeed, he is the only biblical prophet who makes that claim.

Jerusalem had been a religious center long before David's forces captured it near the beginning of the tenth century before Christ (2 Samuel 5:6-8). In the Bible's first mention of that city, we learn that its king, Melchizedek, was also a priest (Genesis 14:18). Indeed, Josephus claims that Melchizedek was the founder of the city (*The Jewish War* 6.438). When David, some eight centuries later, made Jerusalem his capital (2 Samuel 5:9), the traditional imagery associated with that ancient priest/king Melchizedek was absorbed into the official imagery of its new king, David. With respect to Israel, David was the successor of Saul. With respect to Jerusalem, however, David was the successor to Melchizedek, whom we find identified as both king and priest in a psalm related to the Davidic throne (Psalms 110 [109]; cf. Matthew 22:43-45). Isaiah himself was the major prophetic heir to the royal and sacral imagery of ancient Jerusalem.

The theme of Jerusalem is treated differently in each of Isaiah's three parts: the prophecies of the Messiah (chapters 1-39), the prophecies of the Servant of the Lord (chapters 40-55), and the prophecies of the Triumphant Warrior (chapters 56-66).

Much of the context of the first part of Isaiah is the reign of Ahaz (735-716), the grandson of Uzziah. It was a period of massive, officially sanctioned apostasy, so Isaiah's message to Jerusalem was one of judgment. In fact, the book begins with indictment: "Alas, sinful nation,/ A people laden with iniquity,/ A brood of evildoers,/ Children who are corrupters!/ They have forsaken the Lord,/ They have provoked to anger/ The Holy One of Israel,/ They have turned away backward./ Why should you be stricken again?/ You will revolt more and more" (1:4-5). This theme of impending divine judgment on Jerusalem continues through much of this first part of the book (1:8,16; 4:3-4; 10:12,24-24,32; 22:1-14).

Also in this first part of Isaiah, however, but especially during the reign of Ahaz's son and successor, Hezekiah, the prophet speaks of the city's preservation (26:1; 31:4-9; 35:1-10; 37:21-25,33-35; 38:6). The context of these oracles is formed by the various

invasions of the Assyrians into Judah, none of which succeeded in conquering Jerusalem.

In the second part of the Book of Isaiah, the prophecies of the Servant of the Lord, the historical context is the Babylonian Captivity. The oracles in this part of Isaiah are concerned with Jerusalem's restoration: "Speak comfort to Jerusalem,/ and cry out to her,/ That her warfare is ended, that her iniquity is pardoned;/ For she has received from the Lord's hand/ Double for all her sins" (40:2). And somewhat later in the same chapter, "O Zion,/ You who bring good tidings,/ Get up into the high mountain;/ O Jerusalem,/ You who bring good tidings,/ Lift up your voice with strength,/ Lift it up, be not afraid;/ Say to the cities of Judah, 'Behold your God!'" (40:9; cf. 52:1-2,7-8).

This theme of restoration continues in the third part of Isaiah, the prophecies of the Triumphant Warrior: "'The Redeemer will come to Zion,/ And to those who turn from transgression in Jacob,'/ Says the Lord" (59:20; cf. 62:11-12).

What is especially striking about Isaiah's oracles on Jerusalem is the repetition of images and ideas about the holy city in all parts of the book. For example, in both 35:10 and 51:11 we find, "And the ransomed of the Lord shall return,/ And come to Zion with singing,/ With everlasting joy on their heads./ They shall obtain joy and gladness,/ And sorrow and sighing shall flee away." Again, in 65:25 we read about Jerusalem, "'The wolf and the lamb shall feed together,/ The lion shall eat straw like the ox,/ And dust shall be the serpent's food./ They shall not hurt nor destroy in all My holy mountain,'/ Says the Lord." These images of the holy city had all appeared in the first part of Isaiah (11:6-9).

What is perhaps most ironical about Isaiah's oracles on Jerusalem--one the most "fought over" places on the face of the earth--is the prophet's vision of that city as a symbol of universal and everlasting peace. Isaiah's final word on Jerusalem is well expressed in an ancient Christian hymn that begins, *Urbs Ierusalem beata, dicta pacis visio*--"Blessed city Jerusalem, called the vision of peace.

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