

Rain and Word

Isaiah 55:10-13

Romans 8:1-11

Matthew 13:1-90 and 18-23

I love the sound of rain in summer. I love the way it drums on a conservatory roof while I am dry inside; I love the rustling in the trees and the random dripping from the leaves that follows. I love the stillness that comes with the rain. I love the way the grass glistens with the drops of water. And then I love the way the rain makes the fruit swell, the grass grow and every living thing burst with life.

These are the kind of associations that might come to mind as we hear Isaiah's words:

For as the rain and the snow come down from heaven,
and do not return there until they have watered the earth,
making it bring forth and sprout,
giving seed to the sower and bread to the eater,
so shall my word be that goes out from my mouth; it shall not
return to me empty,
but it shall accomplish that which I purpose,
and succeed in the thing for which I sent it.

Isaiah 55:10-11

It is a description of rain as creative and life giving. It is a description of a mysterious 'word' as being creative and life-giving.

It is an emotive passage, and we might instinctively love it – but we might also find it a little hard to explain in a rational way.

But let's begin with the most obvious allusion. One of the most famous passages in the gospels is the opening of St John's Gospel where Jesus is described as the Word:

In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God,
and the Word was God.

John 1:1

John calls Jesus the Word because it conveys the sense that Jesus is how God reveals himself, just as he might speak through a literal word.

John was not saying anything very new. Many religious writers and philosophers spoke of a person who was with God at creation and throughout history; sometimes they call this person the 'word', sometimes they call him or her 'Wisdom'. We find this in the Old Testament books of Proverbs and Wisdom.

But Wisdom and Word have also been identified with the Holy Spirit and it is perhaps this interpretation that most makes sense of what Isaiah is saying. The Word is God in the person who engages actively in our daily lives, to encourage, to rebuke, to speak for God and to achieve God's purposes. The Word is God himself present in our lives.

This particular passage of Isaiah comes at the end of a long section known to us as the Book of Consolation. The people of Israel have had a hard time. They have been disloyal to God, they have entered into dangerous alliances with unreliable foreign powers and as a result they have been invaded and their leading citizens deported to Babylon. It is a national crisis and it is to this desperate situation that the prophet Isaiah speaks. It is in this Book of Consolation that we find the suffering servant songs which give a picture of a person who will suffer for his people in a way that we now see that Jesus suffered. In today's passage, taken from the very end of the Book, we have a vision of a God who works upon us in a gentle creative way, helping us to bear fruit. It is a picture of the Holy Spirit of Jesus Christ.

Paul explains it in a rather different way by contrasting the 'spirit' with what he call 'flesh'. We must be careful in interpreting what he says here. It can sound as if by condemning the flesh he is urging us not to enjoy life. Far from it! In writing of the flesh he is condemning all attempts to please God in our own strength. Pleasing God is not about working harder, flogging ourselves to death, striving to be good people,

to change the world in our own strength. Pleasing God is about allowing ourselves to be changed in God's strength. It is as gentle as summer rain. It is not in the first place about what we do: it is about our attitudes, our disposition, our hearts. The Old Testament Prophet Ezekiel had a striking image:

A new heart I will give you, and a new spirit I will put within you; and I will remove from your body the heart of stone and give you a heart of flesh.

Ezekiel 36:26

It is about allowing the Holy Spirit of God to fill us and take us over, just as the rain slowly penetrates the earth and reveals its goodness.

But just because pleasing God is not about flogging ourselves harder and harder, that does not mean that the Christian attitude is complete passivity, lying back while the Holy Spirit does his stuff. That is the point the Jesus' parable is making.

Like Isaiah, Jesus paints a picture of growth and soil although he focuses not on the rain but on the seeds. Unlike Isaiah Jesus recognizes that some seed does not bear good fruit. And the cause of that is the nature of the soil. The soil may be too thin; there may be too many thorns crowding out the good seed; there may be too much sun.

But of course, some soil is fertile and does indeed yield good fruit. And Jesus has no hesitation in giving credit to the person who hears the word in such a way. But the credit is not for attempting to change the world but for being open to being changed ourselves.

That was the point of Jesus' sermon on the mount. His advice to his disciples was - don't just be concerned about trying not to murder people - control your anger; don't just be concerned about committing adultery - control your lust. Don't just love just your neighbour but love your enemies as well. If you control your actions today you will still need to control them tomorrow and tomorrow and tomorrow. If you change your attitudes today then your actions will follow naturally and inevitably.

Perhaps Gandhi had the Sermon on the Mount in mind when he said

You must be the change you want to see in the world.

and

As human beings, our greatness lies not so much in being able to remake the world - that is the myth of the atomic age - as in being able to remake ourselves.

But Gandhi was wrong in asserting that we remake or change ourselves. We don't. We allow God's Holy Spirit to do it.

Take another look at Jesus' parable of the sower. You are the soil. But what kind of soil are you? And what kind of soil would you like to be? Will you invite the Holy Spirit to fill you and make you the kind of person you want to be?

And now see the consequences of being filled with the Holy Spirit and bearing fruit. It is one of the most joyful passages of the Old Testament:

You shall go out in joy, and be led back in peace;
the mountains and the hills before you shall burst into song,
and all the trees of the field shall clap their hands.

Instead of the thorn shall come up the cypress;
instead of the brier shall come up the myrtle;
and it shall be to the Lord for a memorial,
for an everlasting sign that shall not be cut off.

All that can be yours

Isaiah 55:12-13

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