

Gary Harder, April 14, 2013

“An unbelievable hope”

Texts: Genesis 18: 1-15

Isaiah 51: 1-3

Introduction: I sing in the Pax Christi -The peace of Christ - Choir in Toronto. Pax Christi is a Mennonite rooted but very interdenominational choir that I have sung in for over 25 years. Next week-end in Toronto we are going to give two performances, with full orchestra, of the Oratorio “Solomon”, by George Fredrick Handel. I love singing the great works of the great composers. But I have stumbled a bit over the text of this one. It is an unashamed glorification of King Solomon. I suppose that shouldn't surprize me, given that it is Handel who wrote the Oratorio. After all, he also composed the “Coronation Anthems” in praise of the then King of England. Handel hadn't yet caught on to this separation of church and state thing that the Anabaptists were so keen on.

The music to “Solomon” is stunning. But the text? “Heaven blesses David's throne...live forever pious David's son”. Solomon was anything but pious. Handel celebrates Solomon's wisdom (you remember the story from 1 Kings 3 where two women come to him, each claiming to be the mother of the baby they bring) his wars, his temple, his wealth. There are even references to Queen Sheba and their love. The prophets of the O.T. don't celebrate these things. The prophets tend to be very critical of the whole notion of Kingship itself, as well as of the individual kings.

You may remember how the prophets resisted kingship in the first place. This story is told in 1 Samuel 8. The people come to Samuel and demand a King. “Appoint to us, then, a king to govern us, like other nations”. Samuel argues with the people. “A king will take your finest sons and daughters for his service. Many of you will become his slaves. He will take your best lands, and impose big taxes on your for his army and his palaces.” But the people shout even louder, “No! We are determined that our King may govern us and go out before us and fight our battles – so that we may be like other nations”.

God reluctantly allows them to begin the whole kingship thing. God comforts Samuel, “For they have not rejected you, but they have rejected me from being king over them.” All So that they can be like all the other nations”. And they do become like the other nations, with dire consequences. All the things that Samuel warns them about happen. The slaves, the standing army, the huge taxes, the flaunting of wealth, and in Solomon's case, the massive harum. All the prophets during that whole kingship time become stern critics, thundering against the abuses and enslavements and abandonment of Yahweh God that went along with it.

You could almost sum up that whole long list of prophets words in the phrase, “Your' doing it all wrong”. They unmask the deceptions. They name the injustices. They antagonize almost every king. And sure enough, their words come true. Israel becomes divided between Israel and Judah, each with their own king, and then they start fighting against each other. And then first Israel is destroyed by the Assyrians in 722 B.C. And then Judah, with all of its leaders taken into captivity by Babylon in 587 B.C.

What a tragic and yet inevitable ending to that whole kingship thing that the people so desperately wanted.

New Hope

But it is then that the prophets become messengers of hope and of a promising future. I am so tempted here to turn to the prophet Jeremiah, long one of my favourite prophets, but there would be too much background to give then for one sermon. I'll pass for today and turn to a shorter text from Isaiah. Isaiah 51 (And 65:17-25). (I am inspired here by insight of Walter Brueggeman, my favourite Old Testament scholar.

Isaiah is addressing the exiles. He's talking to those who know are finally ready to acknowledge that this whole kingship thing was a failure. Maybe, thinks Isaiah, they are now ready to listen to a word of hope from God.

"Listen to me, you that pursue righteousness, you that seek the Lord. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug..." Go back to your roots. Go back to your history. Go back to your founding stories. Go back to your identity as a people of God. And what are those roots and founding stories?

"Look to Abraham your Father and to Sarah who bore you; for he was but one when I called him, but I blessed him and made him many...For the Lord will comfort Zion;...joy and gladness will be found in her, thanksgiving and the voice of a song."

Isaiah reminds the people of the story in Genesis 18. Go back to that story to reclaim your own roots and identity and faith and hope. And what is that story?

Genesis 18