



Shoots of Hope for All Creation

Isaiah 61:1 The spirit of GOD is upon me, because God has anointed me; has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; 2 to proclaim the year of the God's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; 3 to provide for those who mourn in Zion— to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of YHWH, to display God's glory.

Is 61:10 I will greatly rejoice in YHWH, my whole being shall exult in my God; for God has clothed me with the garments of salvation, God has covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. 11 For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so YHWH GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

“**P**rophecy is the voice that God has lent to the silent agony, a voice to the plundered poor, to the profaned riches of the world.” Abraham Heschel wrote these words in *The Prophets: An Introduction* over half a century ago. I have pondered his words for almost 50 years and have marvelled at their constantly contemporary ring.

The “plundered poor” of the late sixth century BCE are named in Isaiah 61:1-2, 10-11 as the poor or oppressed, the broken-hearted, the captives, the prisoners and the mourners in the human community.

This passage belongs at the heart of the third and final section of the Book of Isaiah (Isaiah 56-66), generally designated Third or Trito-Isaiah and my reflection addresses the text in the context of the Hebrew Bible rather than in relation to its appropriation in the Christian Scriptures.

Pope Francis Calls Earth "Poor"

Pope Francis has expanded our understanding of those rendered poor by describing Earth in our times as “burdened and laid waste... among the most abandoned and maltreated of our poor” (*Laudato Si'* par 2). Since the Industrial Revolution, and particularly since the period of nuclear testing post-WWII and the consequent release of radioactive isotopes across the face of the planet, Earth itself has been “oppressed” and rendered “poor”.

Earth is crying out for justice and mercy, for a cessation of logging in old growth forests, of mining for fossil fuels, of wanton pollution of oceans and rivers, of over consumption, of all that plunders the riches of our planetary dwelling.

While the cry of Earth for justice and compassion has a particular poignancy at this time of climate crisis and pandemic, it is salutary to remember that Pope Francis's insight is grounded in the prophetic tradition of Israel. It echoes the eighth-century BCE prophetic judgment of Hosea on the destructive effects of human behaviour on the natural world. Hosea laments: "there is no faithfulness or loyalty, and no acknowledgement of God in the land... Therefore the land mourns, and all who live in it languish; together with the wild animals and the birds of the air, even the fish of the sea are perishing" (Hosea 4:1,3).

If we hear the prophecy of Isaiah 61 against the backdrop of Hosea's earlier prophetic indictment and in dialogue with the recent words of Pope Francis, they might release their power to impel us to clothe ourselves with garments of salvation, of righteousness or right relationship, and to bring comfort to the whole Earth community, human and more-than-human.

The righteousness that God causes to spring up is ... for the sake of "all the nations".

Isaiah Encourages Rebuilding

The focus of this section of Isaiah is on rebuilding, on the rebuilding of the "plundered" city of Jerusalem in the post-exilic period and on the reconstitution of God's people in what had become the Persian province of Judah.

The inhabitants of Jerusalem, the returnees along with those who had remained in the land, will not simply be restored to their former state of being. Their post-exilic ways of being will transcend the former pre-exilic ways of their ancestors, just as the glory of the restored city will transcend its former state.

Attending to the Speaker

The speaker (the "me" of Is 61:1) has a key role in the realisation of this dream. But who is this speaker? Are we hearing the words of an individual or a collective personality, or both? Are they the words of a/the prophet, a returnee perhaps? The words uttered are prophetic, but the role is more all-encompassing than the uttering of words of hope or judgment.

The speaker is anointed to "bind up" the broken-hearted or bandage the wounded spirits and to comfort those who mourn. Maybe this speaker is a priest or a royal figure in the line of David, a descendant of Zedekiah who was the last king of Judah. In the biblical tradition, prophets, priests and kings are said to be anointed, but only monarchs or designated authorities have the power to bring about the changes envisaged in this prophecy.

Some scholars suggest that these verses constitute a fifth Servant Song in the tradition of the four Servant Songs of Second Isaiah (Isaiah 42:1-4; 49:1-6; 50:4-1;

52:13-53:12), even if from a different hand. The Servant in Second Isaiah is God's chosen, the one on whom God's Spirit rests, the one who brings forth justice to the nations, the one who glorifies God. These are also attributes of the speaker in Trito-Isaiah.

Much of the post-exilic story is shrouded in mystery and scholars have more questions than answers. It seems to me that the one who proclaims these words is a priestly, prophetic, royal and servant figure who offers hope to the people, returnees as well as those who remained in the land under foreign rule, as they face the daunting reality of rebuilding their lives and their devastated city.

They are not abandoned. They have been released by the Spirit of God from captivity in Babylon and God's Spirit is upon those who are leading them into a new future.

Our Rebuilding

As the deadly COVID-19 pandemic continues to claim lives and instil fear in hearts across the globe, there is a growing realisation that we, like the people of Judah in the sixth century BCE, need to rethink the ways in which we inhabit our world, not only in the immediate future, but for the long term, so that we might rebuild communities of

righteousness or right relationship.

Our reading invites us to hope for and believe in a time when God will truly reign, a time that can be realised, at least partially, in the here and now.

As we reflect on this reading, we might hear ourselves called, in this Season of Advent 2020, to recognise that God's Spirit is upon each of us, that we are truly anointed to bring good news to the destitute, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of Jubilee and to have the courage to eschew the paths of violence that destroy the wonder of God's creation.

It invites us to trust that "just as the earth brings forth its shoots", even so will God "cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations" (Is 61:11).

The righteousness or right relationship that God causes to spring up is not only for the restored community of Zion. It is for the sake of "all the nations".

For those who read the prophecy against the backdrop of Hosea's words about the mourning of the land and in dialogue with Pope Francis's embrace of Earth's agony, the future hope expressed in these lines relates to a new future for all the plundered of our planet. 🌲

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