

THE OLD TESTAMENT

Sermon preached by Anthony Freeman at Holy Cross, Crediton, Advent Sunday 28.11.2010

In days to come ... many people shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the Lord, to the house of the God of Jacob, that he may teach us his ways" (Isaiah 2.3).

These words from the prophet Isaiah were part of our Old Testament lesson this morning. At one level — a superficial level — they have not come true: we have not gone up to the mountain of the Lord in order to learn his ways. But that is because we don't need to; his teaching has come direct to us, here and now. So at a deeper level Isaiah's prophecy, made hundreds of years before the birth of Christ, has come true, and has been fulfilled super-abundantly. By means of the Christian Church, the God of Jacob has now become the Lord of all the earth; and what had been the national religion of one people has been opened up to many people. Thus all nations do come to the Lord to learn his ways, but without leaving home to go to his mountain.

So where does this leave the Hebrew Scriptures, such as the book of Isaiah we have just quoted? It seems that they are both the word of the Lord, speaking to us truly, and also — at the same time — partial, incomplete, and sometimes just plain wrong. Christians have resolved this dilemma by assigning these ancient writings to what we call the Old Testament, whose truthfulness consists chiefly in pointing beyond itself to the New Testament, in which it finds fulfilment. Where the Old Testament was limited, and bound God to one people through Moses, the New Testament is boundless, and opens up God to all people through Jesus Christ.

I remind you of these things this morning, because since Matins and Evensong gave way to Parish Communion, we in Holy Cross have — like much of the Church of England — neglected the reading of the Old Testament in our public worship. Now, having consulted with various people, Nigel has decided to do something about it, and we shall for the coming year — on most Sundays — be using the Old Testament lesson rather than the Epistle as the first reading at this service.

How the lesson readers' hearts must be lifted by the thought of all those wonderful names to get their tongues around! And how the dust will fly off clergy bookshelves, as long untouched volumes on Genesis, Kings, and Ezekiel, are delved into for sermons! But it's all in a good cause, and as I have long and publicly lamented this past neglect of the Old Testament, it is poetic justice that finds me in the pulpit on the first day of this new regime.

My particular task, at the start of this venture, is to show why the Old Testament is important and ought to be read. After all, if its chief purpose is to point beyond itself to the New Testament, and if the New supersedes the Old, why not do away with the Old all together? So, from the earliest days of the church, some Christians have argued. If the Old Testament so often gets things wrong (a vengeful God, animal sacrifice, polygamy, etc.) then why keep it? It is nothing but trouble. Why not just have the New Testament in the Christian bible? Why not let the gospel speak for itself?

The short answer is: because you cannot understand the New Testament, and you cannot make sense of the Christian gospel, without the Hebrew scriptures out of which they grew. Every page of the New Testament is soaked in quotations and allusions to the Old — and so for that matter are most of our hymns (especially in Advent — just look at today's selection). And most importantly, the way we talk about Jesus is cast entirely in Old Testament terms: Saviour, Sacrifice, Second Adam, Son of David, Son of Man, Servant of the Lord, Messiah (Christ), Redeemer, the list is endless.

The ways in which these Old Testament themes permeate the New are legion. Here are a few to be on the lookout for.

1. Direct quotation of a prophecy fulfilled. St Matthew alone uses the phrase “that it might be fulfilled which was spoken by the prophet” some ten times.

2. Direct quotation to support an argument. St Paul, arguing the case for the congregation to support their clergy, reminds his readers that Moses commanded “thou shalt not muzzle a threshing ox”. Well, if even dumb animals are provided with food by and for their work, how much more should apostolic ministers be paid a living wage.

3. Modelling New Testament characters and events on an Old Testament pattern, without direct quotation. Here St Luke is the master craftsman. In his very first chapter, the devout but childless Zachariah and Elisabeth, granted a son in their old age, recall a string of Old Testament couples, from Abraham and Sarah onward.

4. Using a familiar Old Testament story to illustrate a piece of Christian teaching. We had an example of this in today’s Gospel: “For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man” (Matthew 24.37).

5. Assuming Old Testament knowledge to make claims about Jesus. This is a favourite of St John. To give sight to the man born blind, Jesus makes clay and rubs it into his eyes: to the reader who knows that in Genesis God formed Adam out of clay, this is a statement that Jesus is not a human healer restoring lost sight, but the divine creator completing his work on a person not wholly made at birth.

This last example leads me finally into a slightly different but equally important point about the relationship between the Old and New Testaments. It is not just a case of promise and fulfilment, or of patterns being repeated and filled out. There is across the whole Bible, from Genesis to Revelation, a real sense in which a continuous story is being told. To take the New Testament without the Old is like picking up the second volume of a novel without having read the first. Of course it won’t make sense.

This aspect of the unity of the biblical message is nowhere better expressed than in the classic selection of nine lessons used at our annual carol service, where in order to understand the significance of the Christmas story, we “read and mark in Holy Scripture the tale of the loving purposes of God from the first days of our disobedience unto the glorious redemption brought us by this Holy Child”.

Over the coming year, by hearing the Old Testament read week by week, and having its significance explained to us from the pulpit, we should extend our awareness of “the loving purposes of God” from the few familiar passages we hear at Christmas to the full wealth of the Hebrew Scriptures — the Law, the Prophets, the Histories, and the Wisdom books.

As with the disciples on the road to Emmaus on the first Easter evening, our Lord will accompany us, unrecognised at first, “and beginning at Moses and all the prophets, he will expound unto us in all the scriptures the things concerning himself”. And then, like them — being thus prepared — we shall surely know him in the breaking of the bread.