

Though Your Sins Are Like Scarlet

Isaiah 1:10-20

By Allan J. McNicol

Today's text has a vivid association for me. In 1984 I made my first trip to Israel. My work was centered in Jerusalem close to the old city. It was Passover time and I observed there were several notices posted around about the availability of transportation to the Shechem area to watch the Samaritans keep their traditional Samaritan rite of Passover. So I joined a group of people in several large buses and we traveled mainly through Palestine up to Mount Gerizim. The journey was not without its highlights. Both at the front and back of each bus were several Israeli soldiers openly carrying automatic weapons. The buses were pelted with stones as we passed through Ramallah. Even in the Samaritan compound the soldiers were openly visible on the roofs of most of the buildings observing what was happening.

All of this left an impression. But it was hardly the main one. We visitors were directed to a special site where, like the seating for a little league baseball field, we could get a good glimpse of what was taking place. Here less than fifty feet away we watched the Samaritans begin to observe their Passover celebration.

Now for the real impression! A small herd of sheep emerged. Before our eyes they were slaughtered, butchered and began to be roasted on huge pits. Of course other things were said and done in keeping with a liturgy but – shall we say– most of our attention was attracted to what was most visible. I will never forget watching a real animal sacrifice.

Apparently something like this is what drew the attention of the prophet. It was a time between the intermittent wars in Judah. Prosperity had emerged. Large numbers were engaging in the sacrificial covenantal rites. Verse 11 tells us of a multitude of sacrifices. On the surface this display looked impressive. Isaiah even speaks of ‘a trampling of the courts’ (v. 12). Perhaps this is not only referring to the massive number of animals herded in for sacrifices but the large numbers coming for worship. No empty seats here. Before long the parking lot would need to be extended.

And yet there is a major disconnect. In verse 13 we are told that the Lord God cannot endure it. It is not clear whether He is even going to bother to show up. The blood from the sacrifices that they have on their outstretched hands as they engage in the religious rites seems to be really a metaphor for the bloodshed from their moral treacheries. It is a point repeated endlessly in the prophets. The lifestyle of the people does not comport with their

religious claims. The people's behavior stand in absolute contradiction to God's covenant. Something has to give. The moral culture of the people of God has rotted away from the moorings of its basic story.

Thus the prophet thunders his word

Learn to do well

Seek justice

Correct oppression

Defend the fatherless

Plead for the widow (v. 17)

As I understand it Isaiah was a prophet who had access to the elite of his time. As in his days so it is now; the elite need to hear this word.

But I wonder about us regular folk. What should we come away with from this text?

In verse 18 we get a bit of a hint. The old RSV gave us a famous line. The Lord says, "Come let us reason together." I remember well during the Vietnam War LBJ would go to the

windows of the White House and he could hear the constant chant from outside the gates:

Hey, Hey LBJ.

How many kids did you kill today?

Deeply troubled he decided to address the situation. These were words he used, “Come, let us reason together.” Or to put it another way, “We can work this out. If you only could see the full picture I believe you would agree with my policy!”

Now LBJ may be the President but he still was not God. And, I believe, the text is saying that God is just not interested in sitting around having a campfire chat with us about our failures to keep covenant. Exegetes differ widely about the precise rhetorical force of this line but they are sure it does not mean that God is offering to bargain with us over our shortcomings.

I like the translation of Ronald Knox that still catches the idea of the covenant lawsuit!

“Come back,” says the Lord

“And make trial of me!”

In other words, if you will put me to the test by only heeding my word things will begin to happen! Your guilt has left a terrible stain; but with me the stain will be erased. Only I can do that! You have an option. Choose my way and reap rich harvests. Refuse and you will be food for the sword. What other way is there than to heed my word?

As darkness descended on the hill country of the West Bank on that day in 1984 I wondered what God thought about what was taking place. In contrast to the power centers of Jerusalem, and even Ramallah, it all seemed – well, unlike what Isaiah saw at the temple, so flimsy and a bit vulnerable. And I think of us. We study here in a small seminary in small classes. What is there here to change the world? “Come back,” says the Lord, “and really try my word.” Maybe we are here because we have tried everything else! It is my prayer that before we leave this place we too will learn that there really is no other way!

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