

A Celebration of First Chapel in our Facility

The Eternal Word (Isaiah 40:1-12)

When it was determined that our lectionary for this semester was to be Isaiah 40-55 I thought instantly, “What a treasure trove of great texts. Those who preach this Spring will have before them a table spread with an endless variety of delicacies.” Of course, I am speaking of texts. The delicacies that sustain the body come after chapel.

And with respect to great texts there is no exception today. Who among us cannot immediately bring to mind that wonderful scene from *Chariots of Fire* that comes after Eric Little forfeits a key race in the Olympic Games because it falls on his Sabbath. He stands in the pulpit of the Protestant church in Paris and reads those marvelous lines from the end of Isaiah 40:

The Lord is the everlasting God...
He does not faint or grow weary...
He gives power to the faint...
Even youths shall faint and be weary and young men shall fall exhausted
But they who wait for the Lord shall renew their strength
They shall mount up with wings like eagles they shall run and not be weary
They shall walk and not faint.

And this is only one example of the great texts of this chapter.

This morning I think it is appropriate that we look at the opening verses of chapter 40. The prophet hears these words as an announcement that comes from the sacred precincts of the divine council. A new day is dawning for the people of God. As is typical in these scenes there is conversation and it is not always easy to determine exactly who is doing the speaking. But the contour of the message is clear.

Earlier the word of God had come to Isaiah at the time of his call (Isaiah 6). At that time Isaiah had been given bad news. He was called to announce that the cities of Judah would lie in waste, the land would be desolated and the inhabitants would be removed far away. That glory of God, which Isaiah experienced in the temple, would be gone. And so the exile took place.

But now it is a new day. The grass has withered. The flower has faded. The time of judgment is finished. But still there, as always, stands the abiding word of the Lord. And the word for today is good. The people of Jerusalem are addressed again. They hear that the warfare against her has ended. A new exodus is about to take place. They are now exiles in Babylon. But they are about to pass through the wilderness again and return home. The glory of the Lord is returning to Judah. It is about to be revealed. But this time “all flesh shall see it” (Isa 40:5). One would have to go a long way to find a greater vision of hope in the whole of scripture.

This message has obvious applicability to us this morning. The long and tiresome days of waiting for a new facility have ended. Finally, the rough places and edges have been leveled. We can see something of the future potential for this school as we occupy this new facility.

In the coming decades we do not know who will walk through this classroom door, but we do know that people will leave here and go to the ends of the earth. Thus my eyes are drawn to these words “and all flesh shall see it together.” Later Luke will use this text in connection with the ministry of John who ushered Jesus into his ministry (Lk 3:6). But Luke, like most of the early Christians, is reading this text in Greek. And so Luke reads it as, “All flesh shall see the salvation of God.” Of course Luke is saying that salvation is found in Jesus – the one in whom God’s purposes culminate.

That too is the eternal word of God. As Christians we believe that the fullest sense of the promise to the exiles comes to fruition in Jesus.

That eternal word comes to us today. It is mid-winter. The grass is withered. The flower is faded. But God’s word still stands. And in this new day and new place, just as the exiles and John the Baptist, we are summoned to listen to the divine herald, “All people shall hear the salvation of God.”

May this be the mandate that will guide the daily teaching that forthwith will go forth from this place.

Allan J. McNicol
Austin Graduate School of Theology
January 25, 2008