



October 22nd

THE NEW SHOFAR

***Yes, my soul, find rest in God; my hope comes from him.
Truly he is my rock and my salvation; he is my fortress, I
will not be shaken (psalm 62)***

Giving to God what is God's means giving everything

God called Cyrus – the evil king of the pagan empire of Persia – his anointed one. His christ, the one who would inaugurate a whole new era of peace of Israel. Of all of the manifold possibilities for choices, this election of Cyrus by God is among the most weird. He stands as the only man outside of the covenant people, outside of Israel who is called the Lord's Shepherd and the Lord's Messiah.

The fact of God speaking of Cyrus in this way is a message of hope for all of us, in between equal feelings of stunned shock. The last two thousand years of Christian history has established a solid connection of the name *Jesus* with title *Christ*. And so he was.

Imagine the shock and horror on the faces of those Jews living in exile in Babylon when they heard this message from God. Those Jews still struggling under their exile to a foreign land would have associated "messiah" almost exclusively with their own king from the house of David. How could that office be assumed by a foreign conqueror? Has God lost the plot of his saving activities in and through human history?

It is all about God and not about Cyrus

The role of Cyrus in God's plan for Israel is theological, first and foremost, because the biblical passages in which Cyrus appears are not really *about him* but about Yahweh and his special plans for Israel's redemption. Have a read through the wider context in which this reading is set (Isa 44:24-45:13). What we find there is that the call of Cyrus is set in the midst of a litany of God's attributes and actions. Keeping our eyes of what Isaiah is trying to tell us we cannot help but be struck by the way the prophet repeats the first person pronoun in Yahweh's speech (***nine times***) and the verbs in the first person (over thirty instances). Cyrus on the other hand is mentioned by name only twice. Cyrus succeeds only because he is under the grace and direction of the God he does not even know!

To anyone outside the small exilic community, however, Cyrus would have been celebrated as the greatest figure in the world. He was the true power on the planet, and he apparently thought so himself, if his famous edict is any indication. Not long after conquering Babylon, Cyrus allowed all exiled peoples to return to their homelands. The version of this edict on the famous Cyrus cylinder states, "I am Cyrus, king of the world, great king, legitimate king, king of Babylon." But in spite of his relative importance in the human community of the sixth century BCE, he was essentially an instrument in God's hand. He was anointed, yes, but only for the specific task of releasing the captive peoples.

Why did God choose to go down that rather oblique way of bringing his chosen people home from exile? God was simply doing what God was always doing, what God continues

to do down through history into our own present time. God called Cyrus *so that you may know that it is I, the Lord, the God of Israel, who call you by name*. Even though the gods of Cyrus and the Persians were manifold, and he had no idea of the existence of Yahweh the God of Israel, God was working in him and through him. Cyrus was an instrument of God in setting Israel free. God was able to use Cyrus just as he used the Pharaoh of Egypt (Exod. 7:5, 17) to bring about the divine saving plans – even when they did not know they were collaborators with the divine!

God is never absent but we do have to search for and find him

Implicit in this discussion of knowing God is, of course, whether the *people of Israel* themselves **truly know** the God who called and formed them. A strange question until we read through this entire section of the prophesy. The main focus of Isaiah 40-55 is trying to convince the exiles to trust God. In their case, trust in God when the divine victories do not appear all that obvious to them. A few chapters earlier this issue of their knowledge of God was put to them: *Have you not known? Have you not heard? The Lord is the everlasting God, the creator of the ends of the earth (Isaiah 40:28)*. It was because of their struggles to hope and to believe in the victories of God when all seemed bleak that God had sent to them a prophet such as Isaiah.

Clearly the questions presented to the Hebrew people are rhetorical but they hit home in the most powerful of ways. The only guarantee of hope for them was to be found in their remembrance of the great and wonderful things God has been doing for them down through their history. Not once has God's will been stymied. Never once did God come across a power greater than his own. This is why the prophet was now calling on the deep, national remembrance of their covenant with the creator God...*For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways," declares Yahweh. As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts*. They do not have to fully understand the ways of God, just believe in and trust in the reality that God does have "ways" and they are `unfolding as we read this Shofar.

We are different – we know God and knowledge has consequences

Isaiah tells us that Cyrus was useful for God's plans, even though he had no idea about the Truth about the Hebrew God. For us, however, the situation is very different. We know God. We have been blessed by the saving works of God in Jesus Christ who is God's Messiah. God says to us what he declared to his Chosen People Israel. Our knowledge of God must manifest itself into a trust in God for the new things he is doing. We are called to live in a world ablaze with hope, a hope found in even the most surprising and unexpected of people and events. Our responses are to be ever new, ever open to new directions, new possibilities and enduring peace and fulfilment. If God did great things for Israel – bringing them home, setting them, restoring them – through the pagan Cyrus, imagine what God is striving to achieve in our own world, our communities, our parishes and faith communities through those of us who do know, love and serve him.

God continues to use all things for his people's benefit and reveals himself in the most unusual of ways and sometimes the most extraordinary of peoples. Even us. Just keep persevering in hope and God will do the rest.