

Introduction To the Theme of the Year 2023

It is convenient, for our purposes, to put in context the prophetic book of Isaiah, his ministry, and the world to whom he preached. It will not be in an exhaustive way but, in a manner of outline so it can help us to meditate and pray the text proposed for our Week of Prayer.

The Book of Isaiah

The prophet Isaiah is not just the book most cited in the New Testament but it “is to the Old Testament what the apostle Paul is to the New.”¹ And because he foreshadows the mysteries of Christ, St Jerome calls Isaiah: “evangelist.”² Although the origins and division of the book of Isaiah remain disputed, the book’s importance and influence for Judaism and Christianity is undeniable.

The book of Isaiah can be divided into two³ or three⁴ sections:

1. Is 1-39
2. Is 40-66

Or

1. Is 1-39
2. Is 40-55
3. Is 55-66

As our meditation and prayer will focus on chapter one, we can see five themes that will recur again and again across the whole book:

1. “Judgment of Jerusalem: Jerusalem and its kingdom are experiencing disaster as punishment for grave covenant infidelity (Is 1: 2-11).”⁵ Knowing that Judah belongs to the Lord by a covenant, prophets will always try to renew such a covenant, because it was a time when Judah didn’t exist. God’s love created Judah and it is also the receiver of His love.
2. “The Problem of Hypocritical Worship: The liturgical worship in Jerusalem has no efficacy, because the people disregard the moral law and commit great injustice (Is 1:12-17).”⁶ Although they observed the external requirements of liturgical worship, the interior dispositions of the Israelites did not correspond to the meaning of the rites, and they have also divorced rituals of practice of justices. The prophet’s language is ferocious: “Bring no more vain offerings; incense is an abomination to me... When you spread out your hands I will hide my eyes from you” (vv.13. 15). Once he has spoken these blistering condemnations, diagnosing what is wrong, Isaiah offers the remedy for these iniquities. He instructs God’s people to “wash yourselves; make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your deeds from before my eyes; cease to do evil.”
3. “Repentance, Restoration, and the Forgiveness of Sins: Turning away from sin is still possible and will lead to forgiveness and restoration, so that Jerusalem’s sins ‘like scarlet’, will become ‘white as snow’ (Is 1:18-20).”⁷ This implies a liturgical reformation which includes practice of justice and mercy towards the neighbors.
4. “Zion as the Bride of YHWH: The city of Jerusalem (Zion) is depicted as the bride of the Lord who has become a harlot because of her spiritual infidelities toward God. Nevertheless, in the future, she will be restored to bridal purity again (Is 1:21-26).”⁸ Even though YHWH reprimands Jerusalem, he promises to redeem her by justice.

5. “Judgment of the Wicked: Unlike those who repent, the wicked among the people will be destroyed in the imminent judgment, but a righteous, repentant remnant will be saved to experience a glorious restoration (Is 1: 28-31).”⁹ This theme is spread throughout all the prophets: YHWH calls for conversion, He doesn’t want the death of the wicked. (Cf. Ez 18:23).

Isaiah the Prophet

The first line of the books gives us his identity, the recipient of his prophesies and, the time span of his ministry: “The vision of *Isaiah* the son of Amoz, which he saw concerning *Judah and Jerusalem* in the *days of Uzziah, Jotham, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, kings of Judah.*” (Is 1:1). Isaiah name a list of four consecutive kings in the history of Judah. King Uzziah (784-742 B.C.), King Jotham (742-735 B.C.), king Ahaz (735-715 B.C.) and, king Hezekiah (715-687 B.C.) According to chapter 6, Isaiah began his ministry in the year of Uzziah’s death, when the Lord called him and continued his ministry up to the year 867 B.C. “The Vision of the Lord in his Glory stamps an indelible character on his ministry and provides a key to understand his message.”¹⁰ There is ancient Jewish tradition that holds that Isaiah was executed by Hezekiah’s son: “Isaiah, form Jerusalem, died under Manasseh by being sawn in two, and was buried underneath the Oak of Rogel.”¹¹ His ministry spanned around 55 years.

In a careful reading of the book, we can notice two things about his personal life:

1. Isaiah was married (Cf. 8:3) with two sons, Shear-jashub (Cf. 7:3) and Maher-shalal-hash-baz (Cf. 8:3). Both names are a prophetic message.
2. He was affluent and probably came from a wealthy family. Isaiah appears in the Temple (Cf. Is 6) and several times visiting the Kings (Cf. Is 7: 10-17; 38: 1-8).¹²

Isaiah lived and prophesied in Judah (Southern Kingdom) and was a contemporary of prophet Micah in the South and of Amos and Hosea in the Northern Kingdom.

Isaiah’s world

“The first part of the book (Isaiah 1-39) seems addressed to Jerusalem and Judah in the second half of the eight century B.C., when Assyria was the great oppressor and threat to its national existence.”¹³ The many sacrifices and holocausts and the great variety of offerings presented in acts of worship give the sensation that Judah lives in a time of abundance. However, Isaiah foresees the end of a period of great economic success and political stability for both Israel and Judah. This ending is the consequence of crimes against justice.

The powerful had conspired to deprive the poorest, their brothers, of their rights (land). “The decadent upper classes, given over to malice and concerned only with material possessions and pleasures (Is 1: 21-23; 3: 13-15; 5: 8.23; 10:1-4), open to foreign customs and without moral principles or faith in God (Is 5: 18-21), appeared before him as infinitely deserving of divine wrath.”¹⁴ Assyria is God’s instrument for Judah’s judgment.

Judah has forgotten his vocation: to imitate YHWH. What does it mean to imitate YHWH? YHWH’s justice has a preferential inclination for the poor and the marginalized (Cf. Dt 10:17-18). Israel¹⁵, indeed, understood her identity “as a community of persons bound in membership to each other, so that each person as member is to be treated well enough to be sustain as a full member of the community.”¹⁶ Judah is called by God to learn to do good and practice justice again and protect the most vulnerable (Cf. Is 1: 17). And because of Judah's injustice, Isaiah declares unacceptable and offensive the splendid worship by which the noble and powerful hoped to be pleasing to their God (Is 1: 10-20).