



HOMILY by Father Robbie Low

Christ in the Old Testament II

Advent Course 2018 - St Mary's Parish Centre, Bodmin

Last week we looked at the general principle of Christ as the Word of God in the Old Covenant and the particular evidence in the Book of the Genesis. My aim this week is to look at the wider evidence in the history of salvation. I have often come across the attitude, 'Why do we need to bother with the Old Testament?' The simple answer is because it is no good saying that 'Jesus is the answer', if we don't know what the question is. So the OT gives us that history of Man's closest encounter with God from the Fall to the eve of the Incarnation and God's decisive intervention in human destiny. That history takes place primarily within the context of the People of God, Israel. This is because, out of the wreckage of the Fall, God has raised up a people through whom this work will be done. Paganism, always a projection of the worst aspects of Man, always materialistic, always hostile to the innocent, always a culture of death, is embraced by the majority. Israel alone stands out against this because of her call in Abraham. Sadly much of her history sees her sliding into infidelity, wanting to be like the rest of the world. It is in this context that the ministry of the prophets is so important, calling people back, again and again, to the One True God, to Israel's vocation. This is a costly ministry, often fatal. The vocation of Israel

is summed up in the divine blessing of Abraham. It is proclaimed by God that 'In you all the nations of the earth will be blessed.' It is difficult to see how this divine prophecy has been fulfilled if not in Jesus. Judaism always exhibits a tension between its inward looking maintenance of the community to the exclusion of Gentiles, the Ezra model, and its universal vocation to lead the gentiles to the mountain of the Lord, the Isaiah model. Both are correct in the same way the Church is called to be 'in the world but not of it.' But, as we know, it is a difficult path to tread without deviating either to a pietistic puritanism (not much in evidence in our time) or to a surrender to the zeitgeist, the spirit of the age (look around you).

Tonight I want to look at another foundational part of our story, the Exodus. Both Judaism and Christianity revolve around this central experience. For the Jew it is the hub of his self -understanding and identity. For the Christian it is the archetype that, in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus is transformed into an eternal reality of the liberation of Man and his journey to the Promised Land.

The Exodus abounds with significant parallels. The Hebrew people, brought into Egypt as an act of salvation under Joseph, have grown to a perceived threat to the native population. We know from contemporary practice that Egyptians were keen users of contraception. Couple that with the pagan tendency to child sacrifice meant that the native population was declining in relation to the burgeoning immigrant community. Moses life begins under this threat of infanticide. The midwives, the life deliverers, are commanded by Pharaoh to become the killers of the male children. Here we see the parallels with Jesus life. The innocent are slaughtered by Herod as a perceived threat to the state. Plus ca change.

Later when Moses is in exile he encounters the revelation of the One True God in the desert. We are familiar with the story of the Burning Bush. To the early church fathers, the burning bush, the place of the revelation of the divine light and energy and fire, is a type of Mary – a fire with the Holy Spirit but not consumed – where the very nature of God is revealed. Here God identifies Himself as the ‘I AM’, the quintessential being at the heart of everything. It is this divine name that Jesus applies to Himself again and again in John’s Gospel. I am the bread of life, the way, the door, the good shepherd, the vine etc etc. In the arrest scene in Gethsemane Jesus asks, ‘Whom do you seek?’ They reply, ‘Jesus the Nazarene’. Then Jesus declares, ‘I AM HE’ and, in response, the arresting officers fall to their knees.

Why?

Because Jesus has just uttered the Divine Name. This is forbidden to any man to do exceptThe High Priest alone on one day of the year, The Day of Atonement, enters the Holy of Holies in the Temple to stand in the Presence. When he emerges, he proclaims the Divine Name. Only he is permitted to do this and only on this one occasion. As he does so the waiting crowd fall back and kneel.

Later, when Moses begins the plan to set the people free to worship God and begin the journey to the Promised Land, he follows God’s instructions. The final plague on the Egyptian persecutors is the death of the first born. In order to avoid this the Hebrew must sacrifice an unblemished lamb and badge the blood on the doorposts of his dwelling. When the Angel of Death sees the blood of the sacrifice, he will pass over and leave the inhabitants unharmed.

For the Christian, the blood of the Lamb of God, identified by the prophet John the Baptist as the Christ Jesus, turns away the Angel of final death in the Resurrection. It is the Passover bread, food for the

journey, that Jesus will consecrate as His own Body at the Last Supper. The wine of the Passover that He will consecrate as His Blood – and at every Mass of the Church thereafter. The identification between the Exodus event and the life of Christ is underlined in the account of the Transfiguration. There His Passion will be referred to, in the colloquy with Elijah and Moses, in the original Greek as the Exodus. In the rites of initiation in to the Christian Faith, Baptism, we follow the fleeing Hebrew slaves to the waters of the Red Sea and, by faith, walk through unharmed while the waves of death close over the evil, the sins that pursue us. We are free to follow our journey to the Promised Land. And, like our Hebrew forebears, we too often, by fear and failure and longing for worldly things, make a hash of it. But there is no doubt that Christ is, in Christian understanding, the eternal Passover, the final and definitive liberation from sin and death and our incorporation into His Body the gateway to the promise of the return.

Later on, in the long Exodus account, in the wake of the giving of the Law, we see two extraordinary events. The ratification of the covenant – the deal – ratified in blood of sacrifice. The people assent to be God's people and Moses takes the blood of the sacrifice and throws half of it on the altar and half of it on the People. They are bound to God in blood. A few paragraphs later we are informed of an astonishing encounter. Moses and the seventy elders of Israel ascend the mountain and come into the Presence. Beneath His feet is like a pavement of sapphire. God does not harm them. We are told that 'they sat down in His Presence and ate and drank.' Here surely is the prototype revelation of God and the final eternal banquet, later promised in Isaiah, which will manifest in the Last Supper where disciples will eat and drink of and with the divine life which is incarnate in Jesus and will henceforth be available to the faithful in the miracle of the Mass.

This is the briefest summary of the great and overarching themes of Messianic revelation in the Testament. There is a huge amount that we cannot begin to cover but I want to look at just a few more examples in the time remaining to show how consistent and insistent this theme is. Some of you will know that, from the works of the Early Church Fathers right up to the present day, theologians can make a case for almost four hundred prophecies and statements that reference the life of Jesus. Just how remarkable that is can be seen by a statistical assessment done by Peter Stoner, Chairman of the Departments of Mathematics and Astronomy at Pasadena College. Stoner and his researchers chose just eight specific prophecies about Jesus. They came up with extremely conservative probabilities for each one being fulfilled, and then considered the likelihood of Jesus fulfilling all eight of those prophecies. The conclusion to his research was staggering. The prospect that anyone would satisfy those eight prophecies was just 1 in 10^{17} . In [Science Speaks](#), he described it like this:

"Let us try to visualize this chance. If you mark one of ten tickets, and place all of the tickets in a hat, and thoroughly stir them, and then ask a blindfolded man to draw one, his chance of getting the right ticket is one in ten. Suppose that we take 10^{17} silver dollars and lay them on the face of Texas. They will cover all of the state two feet deep. Now mark one of these silver dollars and stir the whole mass thoroughly, all over the state.

"Blindfold a man and tell him that he can travel as far as he wishes, but he must pick up one silver dollar and say that this is the right one. What chance would he have of getting the right one? Just the same chance that the prophets would have had of writing these eight prophecies and having them all come true in any one man, from their day to the present time, providing they wrote using their own wisdom."

Let us just look at a few.

We have mentioned the blessing of Abraham. In his descendants all the earth will be blessed. It is difficult to find another Jewish candidate (never mind a gentile) who qualifies for the fulfilment of this universal benison other than Jesus. This blessing is confirmed in the lineage of Isaac and then Jacob, both part of Jesus' bloodline. (Gen 28 v14)

The Messiah will come from Judah, again in Jesus genealogy and descend from the royal house of David. (Gen 49 v 10). This kingdom will last forever ! (2Sam 7 v 12-14). As the House of David long ceased to rule anywhere or even be extant there is no other claimant to eternal kingship other than Jesus the Christ.

The Messiah, Immanuel – God with us - , will be born of a virgin (Isaiah 7v 14)

We know, from the account of the Annunciation, that Our Lady fulfils this promise in her Immaculacy and purity. Indeed, not only is her response to her vocation predicated on this fact but the very opening greeting of Gabriel the Archangel confirms this truth: (Literally) 'Hail, you who have already been filled with the Divine grace.'

Some modernist commentators insist that the Isaiah passage does not say 'virgin' but rather 'young woman'. This is spurious. The term is 'maiden' and while modern commentators come with their own cultural baggage, an eighth century BC Jewish maiden would be assumed to be a virgin – otherwise the whole prophecy is vacuous. Furthermore this claim for the Messiah is extraordinary. The common understanding of the Messianic hope was the as liberator of Israel. Isaiah prophesies Him to be 'God with us', the Eternal Presence incarnate. There is no other candidate than Jesus.

The Christ will be born in Bethlehem (Micah 5 v 2). The town of David. By rights Jesus should have been born in Nazareth. Because of the

Census Joseph must return to his home town to register. So here international events dictate the fulfilment of prophecy – something over which Jesus could have had no control in utero.

After that, because Herod knows where the threat to his throne is, they must flee abroad to the little Jewish community in Egypt, thereby fulfilling the prophecy of Hosea (11v 1) – ‘Out of Egypt have I called my son’.

In Matthew 4 v 17 Jesus quotes Isaiah’s prophecy that the Messianic ministry would begin in that unconsidered realm, Galilee of the nations, the hotchpotch multicultural northern backwater. And so it does.

The other truth that becomes clear, in the Isaian prophecies particularly, is that the Messiah, while Jewish, is not the exclusive property of Judaism but rather an universal figure who will bring the nations to the worship of the one true God. Again there is only one candidate.

We are familiar with the events of Palm Sunday and, it may be argued, that Jesus was consciously and deliberately fulfilling the prophecy of Zechariah Ch. 9 by riding into Jerusalem on a donkey. What he will have had no control over is the details of his betrayal. The valuation of Zechariah is not only the exact thirty pieces of silver that Judas would earn for his perfidy but its eventual destination is precise. It will go to the Potter’s Field. This is how the blood money is spent after Judas’ abortive attempt to return it to the establishment.

Similarly Christ will have had no control over the grisly ritual of His death and sacrifice. (Ex 12 v46. /Ps 34 v 20) Part of the specific regulations governing the sacrifice of the Passover Lamb is that ‘not one of its bones shall be broken’. This is compounded by a Messianic reference in Ps34 v 20 which declares the skeletal integrity of the Messiah. We know, from the Gospels how close this came to being unfulfilled. The soldiers were instructed to break the legs of Christ and his two crucified companions –

in order that they might die quickly and be out of sight by Sabbath eve to placate the Jewish authorities. The two thieves are despatched thus. Jesus is not because they observe that there is no need. He is already dead. To be certain they pierce his side with the Lance. Against all odds and orders the bones of the sacrificial Lamb of God survive.

Enough.

Not only is this list not exhaustive but it cannot be. I hope that this little taster will have whetted your appetite. More than that I hope it will keep you alert to those first readings at our Sunday Mass and give you the wider perspective of the Faith.

The history of Man's encounter with God stretches from the moment of Creation to the moment when God will wind up the bloody sheet of human history at the end of time. Christ, as the Word of God, is both the origin and the end of all that.

Only when we have grasped the enormity of that can we begin to understand the enormity of what God has done in Christ in becoming Man in the womb of the Immaculate Mother, Mary.

Only when we see who this person of Christ is can we comprehend the edges of the mystery of the Resurrection, its implications for our eternal destiny and know before whom we will stand at the final judgement.

To reprise St. Augustine:

The New Testament is hidden in the Old.

The Old Testament is fulfilled in the New.

The eternal is revealed in time and made Himself known to Man.