

Sunday 18 January 2026 – Isaiah and John the Baptist – Michael Bayley

An epiphany is a moment of revelation, or realization. In this season of Christ's Epiphany, Michael Bayley explores the message of suffering, redemptive hope in Isaiah and John the Baptist.

Readings:

Isaiah, 49: 1-7. John, 1: 29-42.

Sermon: Isaiah and John the Baptist – Michael Bayley

The Jews had been having a tough time. It was one disaster after another. In 722 BCE the king of Assyria finally captured Samaria, the capital of the northern Kingdom of Israel after three years' siege and deported entire population. After this they disappear from history. A similar fate looked as though it might await the southern kingdom of Judah. In 598 BCE Jerusalem was captured by the Babylonians and the most prosperous inhabitants were deported to Babylon. After another revolt the city was attacked and captured again in 587 and on this occasion the entire city including the temple was destroyed and the remaining population taken to Babylon. This could have been the end of the Jews, of the Jewish nation, however during that time in exile the Jews had an extraordinary cultural and religious revival which firmly established their distinctive identity.

Then Cyrus king of Persia rose up against the Neo-Babylonian empire and in 539 he conquered and occupied Babylon. Given the history of the time there is nothing very remarkable about that but what was remarkable was that in 538 Cyrus issued an edict that the Jews could return with is blessing to Judah and Jerusalem. He did just the same with other peoples who had been deported.

Our first reading today came from Isaiah chapter 49. This puts it in the second of the three sections into which scholars divide the book of Isaiah, and comprises chapters 40 to 55. Second Isaiah, as he is generally referred to, was writing in the time when it was becoming increasingly clear that the Jews would be allowed to return to their homeland. As a result second Isaiah is one of the more hopeful parts of the Old Testament and the writer even refers to Cyrus as "the Lord's anointed".

It also marks a wider vision of the nature of the god the Jews worshipped, no longer just a tribal god but universal which is the message of Epiphany:

"And now the Lord has said to me; 'it is too slight a task for you, as my servant, to restore the tribes of Jacob, to bring back the survivors of Israel: I shall appoint you as a light to the nations so that my salvation may reach earth's farthest bounds.'" [49: 6] Sometimes it could be described as triumphalist: "I shall make your oppressors eat their own flesh and they will be drunk with their own blood. [49: 26]

But set within second Isaiah are the four remarkable servant songs'. This morning's reading was the second. The songs prefigure the work of Christ more powerfully than any other part of the Old Testament, especially the 4th:

"Yet it was our afflictions he was bearing, our pain he endured, while we thought of him as smitten by God, struck down by disease and misery. But he was pierced for our transgressions, crushed for our iniquities; the chastisement he bore restored us to health and by his wounds we are healed. "(53: 4-5)

What we have in this morning's reading, and in second Isaiah as a whole, is the sense of stepping into a new more hopeful era but also mingled with this a deeper understanding of what the future may bring. Hope for a better future yes, but also suffering but hopefully redemptive suffering.

The passage from John's gospel is also looking forward to a new era. John the Baptist is recorded as quoting from second Isaiah to explain his role. "I am the voice of one crying in the wilderness, 'make straight the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." (1: 23) But the tone is very different. Look at how John introduces his gospel. After the magnificent prologue, "In the beginning was the word, and the word was with God and the word was God" [1: 1] John introduces 'the way of the Lord' by bearing witness to what he had experienced when he was called on to baptise Jesus. "I came baptising with water, that he might be revealed to Israel (and) I saw the spirit descend as a dove from heaven and it remained on him... and I have seen and borne witness that this is the son of God." [1: 30,34]

Powerful stuff but what John records as happening next is almost prosaic. It is about people meeting and talking. It is very down to earth in the same way that the basic story of the birth of Jesus is very down to earth. Two disciples are standing with John the Baptist and Jesus walks by. John says, 'There is the Lamb of God'. The two disciples heard what he said and they follow Jesus. Jesus turns and says to them, 'What are you looking for?' They ask him, 'Where are you staying?' 'Come and see' he replies so they come and see where he's staying and stay with him for the rest of that day. It was the evangelist adds, about four in the afternoon.

The story gathers pace. One of the two who followed Jesus is Andrew, Simon Peter's brother. The first thing he does when he leaves Jesus is to find his brother Simon and says to him 'We have found the Messiah'. He brings Simon to Jesus who looks at him and says, 'You are Simon son of John; you shall be called Cephas' [that is, Peter, 'the rock'].

After that more disciples join Jesus. But what comes after that? It is the story of the wedding at Cana in Galilee. After that it is the story of Jesus driving the money changers out of the temple.

This is John's equivalent to the birth narratives of Matthew and Luke. What does this tell us about the nature of John's gospel and the impression he wants to give us of Jesus and his ministry and the new era initiated by him?

One further point. Today marks the beginning of the week of prayer for Christian unity. There is far less enthusiasm about this than there was in the past. Does that matter? I have been talking about new eras. It feels as though at the moment we are entering a new and troubling era globally. In the light of the threats posed, there have been calls for us to stand in solidarity especially but certainly not exclusively with Ukraine, Greenland and maybe I should add Canada. I do not think that I am alone in feeling that this is desperately important for the future of our children and grandchildren. Surely Christians and the churches should be a vital part of that solidarity. How can we express that solidarity in a way that will make a difference, that will make those people who are under threat realise that they are not abandoned, that they do have support which is not just warm words. Yes we must pray but what else?

I am reminded of the words of Martin Niemoller:

First they came for the Communists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Communist. Then they came for the Socialists, and I did not speak out because I was not a Socialist. Then they came for the trade unionists, and I did not speak out, because I was not a trade unionist. Then they came for the Jews, and I did not speak out, because I was not a Jew. Then they came for me, and there was no one left to speak out for me

Is that too melodramatic? I don't know. But here is a prayer from Christian Aid.

Grant us peace;
Not the partial piece of silent guns,
But the fulfilled piece of lasting security.
Not the uneasy peace of people under control,
But the deep peace of justice experienced by all.
Not the tense peace that wonders what will happen next,
But the rich peace of nations and tribes and peoples as at one.

Grant us peace; and create in the hearts of humankind a desire to see all people living in justice and safety.

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