

Sermon for Palm Sunday, Year A
by Fr. Garrin W. Dickinson
Holy Nativity, Plano
16 March, 2008

Isaiah prophesies to the southern kingdom of Judah before the rise of Babylon as a world power. And yet he predicts, over 150 years before the fact, that Judah, all that is left of Israel after the Assyrian destruction of the northern kingdom, will be overrun by this as yet nonexistent empire. They will be taken into exile in Babylon as a judgment on their unfaithfulness.

But Isaiah also prophesies that God will eventually judge Babylon itself, deliver his people from their exile, and bring them back to the land of promise. In our reading today, it is to the Babylonians themselves that God is speaking directly. The pagan conquerors have become the vanquished, yet they still cling to their idols, which cannot save them. And God says, “Turn to me and be saved, all the ends of the earth! For I am God, and there is no other.” None of the idols of the Babylonians foretold what would happen. Only the God of Israel did, through his prophet Isaiah. And yet he offers his salvation to the whole world, even the Babylonian oppressors, because he is the author and creator of the whole world.

“To me every knee shall bow, every tongue shall swear,” he says through Isaiah. “Only in the Lord it shall be said of me, are righteousness and strength; to him shall come and be ashamed, all who were incensed against him.” Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength.

And, of course, the prophecies of Isaiah are fulfilled in due course. Babylon is conquered by Persia, and the exiles are freed to return to the land of promise. But it remains to be seen how God will provide salvation to the ends of the earth. And the promise remains a hope, rather than a present reality. And the returned exiles continue to wait for their Messiah.

And, in the fullness of time, comes one Jesus of Nazareth, who “being in the form of God, did not count equality with God a thing to be grasped”. Our translation has “*though* he was in the form of God”, but I don’t think that his attitude was *in spite of* being God. I think it was *because* he was God. Only in the Lord are righteousness and strength. We are the ones who think that equality with God is a thing to be grasped, because we are evil and weak. The eternal second person of the Holy Trinity did not, precisely because he is righteous and strong.

And so the eternal second person of the Holy Trinity, God himself, the one who spoke through Isaiah, emptied himself of the divine form and humbled himself to take on our form, the form of a slave under judgment. The righteousness of the God who alone is righteous is shown forth in the vast humility of the cross. The strength of the God who alone is strong is shown forth in the

submission and obedience of the cross. Jesus carried the entire massive weight of the unfathomable sin of the whole world. And he brought it to an end.

So now we know how God proposes to extend salvation to the ends of the earth. We know what righteousness and strength look like. They look like the image we have before us every week: the crucifix. And we know for sure that what God has said will come to pass. “Every knee shall bow ... and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father.”