

Macbride Sermon on the Application of Messianic Prophecy, Oxford University, 2003

Isaiah 10:33-11:9

The subject of the Macbride University Sermon is described as "the application of the prophecies in Holy Scripture respecting the Messiah to our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ." There have been times when Christians have attached great evidential value to the fulfilment by Jesus of Old Testament prophecies of the Messiah. They have wanted to argue not only that Jesus is shown to be the expected Messiah by the exact correspondences between the prophecies and their fulfilment in Jesus, but even that the fulfilment of these prophecies in Jesus is a kind of demonstration of the truth of Christianity. The fulfilment proves at the same time both that the prophecies were inspired by God and that Jesus was the Messiah that God himself sent. This kind of apologetic appeal to messianic prophecy is less often heard today. I think this must be at least partly due to the influence of biblical scholars who have insisted on a historicizing kind of exegesis that tries to read the prophecies as they would have been heard at the time they were written, and very often finds that this differs considerably from the way the writers of the New Testament read them when they interpreted them as referring to Jesus. I sense that New Testament scholars are sometimes a little embarrassed by the gap that seems to open between the historical meaning of the Old Testament texts and the way they were read by New Testament Christians. They explain in a matter-of-fact manner the way New Testament writers interpreted the Old, but they refrain from commenting on its validity.

But this is not a minor issue on which we can easily, as contemporary Christians, merely beg to differ from our first-century fathers and mothers in the faith. The identification of Jesus as the expected Messiah is after all what is meant by calling him Jesus Christ, 'Christ' being simply the Greek translation of 'Messiah.' Christians are, literally, 'messianists,' people who regard Jesus as the Messiah. Forgetting that Jesus is the Messiah goes along with a temptation that has been all too often influential in Christian history - the temptation to deny the essential Jewishness of Christian faith and to cut the New Testament's connexion with the Old Testament. At stake in the issue of Jesus' messiahship is the whole question of the continuity between the two Testaments, the identity of the Christian God who is the God of Israel as well as the God of Jesus Christ and whose consistent purpose for the world was already made known to his people Israel, already set in motion through his people Israel, and reached a climactic stage in Jesus. For a whole raft of reasons Christians too easily imagine that God, as it were, started his project for the salvation of the world with Jesus. No, he started it with Abraham.

To make sense of Jesus' messiahship we really have to appreciate the way the early Christians read the whole Hebrew Bible as a book of dynamic expectation for the future, a book which, as it were, plots God's way to his coming kingdom of righteousness and peace in all the world. The passages we think of as messianic prophecies as those in which this orientation of the Old Testament to the messianic future becomes most obvious and explicit. But they are not detachable from the rest of the Old Testament. They have their roots in the long story of God's people the Old Testament tells, they express the same will of the same God who gave Israel the Torah, the future they depict is shaped by the same concerns as the God of Israel

characteristically expresses throughout the Old Testament - concerns for righteousness and peace, for the poor and the neglected, for Israel and for all the nations, even, we shall see, for the non-human creation. These concerns that God expresses in the Torah and seeks to implement in his dealings with his own people Israel seemed so often sadly ineffective but could never be abandoned, God being who God is. Throughout the Old Testament, in all its variety, they press forward, one way or another, towards God's coming kingdom. And often it is out of their apparent failure in the specific circumstances of Israel's story that they reach messianic expression, focused on a future that seems quite unattainable in human terms, but that must come because God is God and his purposes for the world cannot fail.

When we read the Old Testament that way, then I think we can see that a purely historicizing exegesis of messianic prophecies is not in fact adequate to their nature. They belong to the dynamic movement of the Old Testament towards the future. They are key expressions of that movement. We miss their real significance if we try to tie them down to the circumstances of their original composition. They are open texts whose meaning is not complete until the promises they make finally find fulfilment in reality. In many cases the editors of the Old Testament, who put together the actual collections of texts that we have, already - and surely quite deliberately - detached these prophecies from the original circumstances in which they were first composed. The prophecies had already left those circumstances behind in their drive towards the messianic future.

But here we perhaps run into another obstacle to Christian appreciation of the messianic prophecies. If these prophecies have been fulfilled in the New Testament's history of Jesus, then, while it may be interesting to observe that, do the prophecies any longer have anything to say to us? Doesn't the fulfilment supersede the prophecy? I think the answer is no: the prophecies continue to illuminate the reality of Jesus for us. This is really why the purely evidential use of messianic prophecy is inadequate. The New Testament writers do, indeed, cite the prophecies in order to show that Jesus fulfilled them, but they also turn to the prophecies to help them understand Jesus, to understand what God was really doing in the life, death and resurrection of Jesus, to understand how it is that all the purposes of God for the world - purposes already known from the Hebrew Bible - are now focused in Jesus. Those purposes are not yet completed. Jesus himself as God's Messiah still has a future which is also the world's future. The messianic prophecies, read in a Christian way as referring to Jesus, still seek their fully adequate goal in the messianic kingdom to come.

So I do not think we should think of the messianic prophecies as exhausted, used up, superseded, with nothing to say to us. As indications of God's purpose for God's Messiah and the world they belong to the reality of Jesus. They and what the New Testament tells us of the historic reality of Jesus are mutually illuminating. Certainly we should read them in the light of Jesus' fulfilment of them, which was sometimes an unexpected or surprising kind of fulfilment that puts the prophecies in a new light. But we may also expect the prophecies to throw light for us on Jesus.

Now let's have done with generalities and take a look at one of the best known and extensive of the messianic prophecies, the passage we heard from Isaiah (10:33-11:9). The Messiah here is the ideal ruler of the future, the new and better David, and we know this from Isaiah's use of the name Jesse, David's father. The Messiah is depicted

as a shoot that grows out of the stump of Jesse, represented as a tree. I designed our reading to start with the last two verses of chapter 10 because the common habit of starting to read this passage at the beginning of chapter 11 deprives us of an important clue to the meaning of this image of the tree. The end of chapter 10 depicts God, with a great axe in his hand, hacking down a forest and felling the tallest trees. This is God executing judgment on the rulers and the powerful, those who arrogantly exalt themselves, usurping God's rule and using their power in flagrant disregard of God's righteousness. God hacks down the cedars of Lebanon, the Assyrian oppressors of Israel, but he also fells the tree of Jesse, the line of David's descendants, the royal house of David, the corrupt rulers of Israel and Judah. The Davidic monarchy has failed and God removes it. The stump of Jesse's tree is all that is left of the cherished promise of David and his successors for a kingdom of justice, compassion and peace.

As so often the hope of a Messiah rises from the ashes of disappointment for the coming of God's kingdom. The Messiah will not come from the failed dynasty of David. Rather God honours his promise to David in a quite unexpected way. He does back to the origins of the dynasty, the root of Jesse's tree, and raises up a new shoot, as it were from nowhere, just as he had chosen David himself. Remember the story: David the youngest son of Jesse's eight, so insignificant that no one even thought to call him when Samuel was deciding which of Jesse's sons God had chosen for king. David the mere shepherd boy was God's surprising choice, though perhaps not so surprising when one gets to know the biblical God who characteristically chooses the least important, the least qualified in the eyes of the world. In David God hoped for a king after his own heart, a king who would not forget his origins among the humblest of his people, a king who would govern in compassionate solidarity with the poor.

So when David's royal descendants have got too used to the distancing privileges of power, God will make a fresh start, with a new David, a branch from the roots of Jesse. I think this image may help those of us who maybe have some difficulty with the pervasive image of kingship in the biblical messianic tradition. Neither the absolute rulers nor the constitutional monarchs we know seem to us to be very suitable models for the role the New Testament gives to Jesus. But the messianic king of the prophecies is not the regular sort of king, about whom the Bible itself is fairly derogatory. The messianic king is a sort of king that never was, a king from the people who never abandons his roots among the people, a king whose rule embodies God's concerns, a king who rules for the sake of all and therefore especially for the sake of the poor. Luke's portrayal of Jesus in the opening chapters of his Gospel echoes this messianic hope of the poor, not only in a way very familiar to us: the fact that shepherds are the first to be told of this new David, but also in a probably much less familiar way: in Luke's genealogy of Jesus' ancestry. It makes Jesus a descendant of David, certainly, but surprisingly not of Solomon and the famous kings of the Davidic dynasty; rather Jesus' ancestry derives from an obscure son of David, Nathan, and is traced through a host of quite unknown people. He is the shoot from the stump of Jesse.

Isaiah's picture of the Messiah and his rule unfolds around three themes that appear in succession: wisdom, justice and peace. The wisdom comes from God: 'The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the Lord.' Out of this God-

given wisdom comes the righteousness with which he rules, a righteousness which truly puts all wrongs to rights, and is therefore, as so often in the Old Testament, justice especially for those whose rights and interests are routinely disregarded, for those who have no one to lobby for them or means to work the system, the poor and the humiliated, the wretched of the earth. We begin to see how idealistically remote from experienced reality this messianic rule is. But there is more: 'he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked.' In other words, he has only to pronounce the just verdict for it to take effect. In this legal system violence is not needed to enforce the law. Nor is there the usual merely conventional correspondence of punishments with crimes. Rather, on this king's lips, truth itself is so undeniably true that it prevails by its own power.

And then there is peace, though Isaiah depicts it vividly without using that word. We must assume that there is peace between people: 'They will not hurt or destroy in all my holy mountain' must entail that. But the prophecy depicts peace unforgettably by focusing on the even less readily imaginable: peace in and with the world of animals. We are offered a kind of messianic ecology, a return to paradise perhaps, a frankly impossible world in which wild animals have changed their diets and their nature. But we should notice that the peace is not merely, as is usually observed, between predators and prey, but, more specifically, between wild animals and domesticated animals: wolf and lamb, lion and calf, bear and cow. What is reconciled is the human world and the world of wild nature. Strikingly the only humans who actually appear in this picture are children: the little boy who leads the lion and the calf as though both were domestic animals, and the babies who play safely around the homes of the snakes. The reason is surely the innocence and harmlessness of children. In this ideal world from which violence has been banished, those who are always the most unequivocally innocent victims of violence, the children, are finally safe. Just as when we think of justice we should especially remember the powerless whose rights are most easily neglected, so when we think of violence and war we should especially remember the children, the most innocent of victims.

This vision of the peaceable kingdom is evoked, I believe, in Mark's Gospel, when Jesus in the wilderness after his baptism is said to be 'with the wild animals.' Jesus in his peaceable companionship with the wild animals symbolically, at least, establishes the messianic peace in all creation. This is a good illustration of the way the messianic prophecy still illuminates for us the messianic history, which we could not otherwise have understood in this way. And it also shows how the messianic prophecy still points the way of the messianic history into a future of adequate fulfilment - Jesus' own future with the world. I do not suggest we take Isaiah's picture literally, but I do suggest we take it seriously as pointing the way to God's final purpose of peace not only for humanity but for his whole creation.

It is a future that can only come from God. One last obstacle to Christian appreciation of the messianic prophecies I want to mention is the legacy in our thinking of the modern idea of progress. The goal of these prophecies, the kingdom of God, is no product of a process of historical progress. Not only is it historically implausible to assimilate this messianic hope to progress: are we any nearer to a reconciliation of humanity and wild nature than people were in Isaiah's day? Also, the vision here is certainly not processive or progressive; rather it makes a vast leap from the evil of the present to the inconceivable good of a quite discontinuous future.

This is not a vision that grows out of the present, but one that breaks in from God's future.

And so how do we live with such a vision? I suggest that we live between messianic patience and messianic impatience. Knowing that this future can only come from God, we avoid the utopian impetus to establish a perfect world for ourselves, an impetus we know, not least from the history of the twentieth century, so often ends in violence and repression, devouring its own dream. We avoid too the paralyzing disappointment and disillusionment of failed utopianism. Messianic hope thrives in the desert of the humanly desperate. Its expectation looks to God. It waits patiently for God's time.

But equally we avoid the quietist withdrawal from history that simply leaves this world to its fate and finds consolation in a wholly otherworldly hope. We learn from Jesus the value of every anticipation of the messianic kingdom, large or small, limited but full of God's presence. Already the kingdom comes from God, in the fragmentary and fragile forms of historical existence. We do simply what we can, knowing that God can make much more of what we do than we can make of it ourselves. We welcome every anticipation of the kingdom with the messianic impatience that prays urgently 'Thy kingdom come.'

So to confess Jesus the Messiah of this vision of Isaiah, is to seek in Jesus the wisdom that comes of knowing God, to seek from Jesus the righteousness that puts all wrongs to rights, and to follow his way into the peaceable kingdom.