

“The Return of the King”
Isaiah 40:1-10; 2 Peter 3:8-14
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December 11, 2022

Peter Jackson’s film adaptation of JRR Tolkien’s Lord of the Rings is said to be one of the greatest movie series of all time. The books are even better. I have since read it several more times, every time enjoying Tolkien’s story-telling ability.

The Lord of the Rings has several imbedded Christian themes, Tolkien himself admitted. One of the overtly Christian themes that jumps out of the pages of Tolkien’s text is a prophecy of how the people of Gondor will recognize their rightful king with this sign:

“The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.”

I’d like to think that when Tolkien wrote this line, that he had in mind Psalm 146, a litany of all the good that is God, punctuated with acclamations of praise to the LORD. Verse 3 declares about God:

“He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.”

Tolkien’s intent becomes clear when he wrote the line:

“The hands of the king are the hands of a healer, and so shall the rightful king be known.”

Gondor was waiting for their true king. And we are waiting for the return of the only true King, Jesus Christ our Lord and Saviour. Our Scripture readings in Isaiah 40 and in 2 Peter 3 point us to this long-awaited return of our King.

History always provides context to help us further understand Scripture text. Let us look at all that was that led to the wonderfully beautiful text of Isaiah 40.

The days of Isaiah were filled with political intrigue and unholy alliances between the kings of the land. In 750 BC, the Assyrian empire was on the rise. To defend themselves against this powerful nation, the kings of Israel and of Syria tried to enlist Ahaz, the king of Judah to an alliance against Assyria, the rising power in the East. Instead, he turned to the enemy Assyria for help. It’s like that old reality TV series “The Survivor” where to win you must form unholy alliances with your competitors and later stab them in the back. Assyria did help, but it came with a heavy price – Judah was forced to pay heavy tribute. It was essentially protection money.

Hezekiah, the son of Ahaz, succeeded his father to the throne of Judah. When the Assyrian king died, Hezekiah figured it was a good time to rebel and looked once more to Egypt for an alliance against Assyria. But Egypt did not deliver. In punishment, the Assyrians forced Hezekiah to pay a heavy tax – once again, protection money.

Kingdoms come and kingdoms go; eventually the Assyrians fell to the emerging Babylonian Empire. The Babylonians then waged war with Egypt, with Judah caught in-between the two

superpowers. Babylon led by king Nebuchadnezzar won over Egypt. Judah went under Babylonian rule. The last king of Judah, Zedekiah, contrary to the prophet Jeremiah's counsel, rebelled against Babylon, again looking to Egypt for help. In punishment, Nebuchadnezzar sacked Jerusalem, destroyed the Temple, and deported the Jewish nobles to Babylon. Thus began the exile.

These events 3,000 years ago will seem remote and academic and will elicit as much passion today as would the sight of a falling leaf. However, I ask you to try and empathise with the people of Jerusalem, their distress and grief when the Babylonians destroyed Solomon's Temple, ransacked the city and deported most of them to Babylon. Let's say the city of Richmond expropriated the land here, razed this church building to the ground, then resettled all the church members and adherents to Nunavut. How would you react? In extreme distress, unimaginable grief and perhaps incandescent anger. Would you agree? Now think further. What if the Federal government took all British Columbia and relocated everyone to Hudson Bay? Unimaginable and impossible under the law, yes?

But that is what Babylon did to Judah.

The writer of Lamentations penned the indescribable sorrow of those who picked up the pieces after the Babylonian ransacked Jerusalem:

"Look and see if there is any sorrow like my sorrow, which was brought upon me, which the Lord inflicted on the day of his fierce anger."

"For these things I weep; my eyes flow with tears; for a comforter is far from me."

Psalm 137, voicing the unbearable lament of those resettled by the Babylonians to a strange land wept:

"By the rivers of Babylon – there we sat down and there we wept when we remembered Zion."

This terrible, terrible disaster is what Isaiah chapters 1 to 34, and 36 to 39 were all about.

But just as the sweetness of sugar is made even more intense after a bite of something terribly bitter or biting sour, it is from deepest sorrow that hope and deliverance becomes even more intensely anticipated, celebrated, and ultimately enjoyed beyond understanding.

Thus, hope begins to push out in chapter 35: "Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; then shall the lame man leap like a deer, and the tongue of the mute sing for joy." Joy – today's Advent theme.

And finally, hope breaks through in all its glory in chapter 40: "Comfort, O comfort my people, says your God..."

The word "comfort" is in the imperative plural, a command given to several. Who are these "several?" The exiles? Most likely not, because the devastated cannot bring comfort to the equally devastated. It makes more sense that God directed this command to the heavenly host – the angels that surround the throne of God.

A conversation begins among the heavenly host.

The first voice cries out: Build a superhighway upon which God will travel, to lead the exiles from Babylon back to Judah:

- Make a highway across the dessert.
- Lower the hills, raise the valleys – level the ground

This first voice is seconded by another who shouts: “Cry out!”
But a third pessimistic voice asks: “What shall I cry”

- all grass withers
- flowers fade and they blow away

The third voice is saying that the people are weak, fickle and unreliable. By implication, the third voice is asking: how will this work if the people are too weak and unreliable?

A fourth voice counters: “Yes, the people are weak, but God’s will is unbreakable.

- God’s purposes will not be frustrated.
- The rescue and renewal of Judah is firmly grounded on God’s intentionality, and on God alone.
- The triumphant return to Jerusalem will happen because God decrees it so despite the weakness and fickleness of man.

Alexander Pope, the 18th century English poet and philosopher, wrote this familiar couplet:
“Hope springs eternal in the human breast; Man never is, but always to be blest.”

In light of Isaiah’s depiction of the power and of the will of God, let me propose a change to Pope’s verse:

“Hope springs eternal in the human breast; but only in God will It find rest.”

The conversation then shifts to Jerusalem, to Zion: “Get you up to a high mountain, O Zion, herald of good news... and say to Judah – ‘Behold your God!’”

Israel had always conceived of God as a fierce and ferocious warrior, sort of a “macho” type of character, mighty defender of his chosen people. Isaiah presents a different side of God: the “macho” image is transformed into that of a caring shepherd.

“He will tend his flock like a shepherd; he will gather the lambs in his arms; he will carry them in his bosom, and gently lead those that are with young.”

These contrasts in Isaiah – of sorrow then comfort, of despair then hope, of violence then peace: these are mirrored in Revelation chapter 5.

- John saw God seated on the throne holding a scroll sealed with seven seals.
- A mighty angel thundered: “Who is worthy to open the scroll?” And there was no one.
- John was overcome with sorrow and wept bitterly. Like it had been with the devastated Jerusalem of Isaiah, John was inconsolable in despair.
- Then an elder said: “Do not weep. See, the Lion of the tribe of Judah, the Root of David, has conquered, so that he can open the scroll and its seven seals.” Just as the herald in Isaiah proclaimed “Behold your God,” the elder announced the arrival of a mighty warrior, mighty King.

- Then John looked and saw something totally non-macho and very much unexpected. Instead of a triumphant warrior King leading the people back to Jerusalem, John saw a Lamb, standing as if it had been slain.

The mighty Warrior is the same as the Lamb who was slain, the same as Isaiah's gentle shepherd: the Lord Jesus Christ. This Jesus Christ will return: Isaiah proclaimed it, Revelation declares it.

From where we stand, it has been 2,000 years and counting and the King is yet to return. This delay, according to 2 Peter, springs from the compassion of God, who is not willing for anyone to die, but that all come to repentance, that all come to salvation.

Isaiah 55 in the same theme of exile, redemption and return declares: "Seek the LORD while he may be found; call upon him while he is near." When the exiles in fulfilment of God's word returned from Babylon to Jerusalem, and when we ourselves enter the New Jerusalem upon the return of our King, then as Isaiah writes:

"For you shall go out in joy and be led forth in peace; the mountains and the hills before you shall break forth into singing, and all the trees of the field will clap their hands."

What joy that will be upon the return of the King leading his people, that even the creation itself will break out in song.

In Tolkien's fantasy world, Gondor waited for their king. On a grander scale, we in Christ are waiting for the return of Jesus Christ our King and the healing and renewal of all there is. The season of Advent is all about this anticipation of the return of our King. The incarnation has taken place. Our Lord Jesus has gone up into the heavens preparing a place for us. We watch and wait, eagerly anticipating his return with joy beyond understanding.

As sure as Isaiah's prophecy was fulfilled then, it will be so for us today: the King will return at an unexpected moment, in a twinkling of an eye, at the last trumpet. And the King will gather us all up, like a shepherd gathering the lambs up in his arms.

Maranatha! Lord, come quickly.

Amen.