

## Isaiah 25:1–10

<b>THE OPPRESSIVE CITY</b>	<p>O LORD, you are my God;  I will exalt you; I will praise your name,  for you have done wonderful things,  plans formed of old, faithful and sure.</p> <p><sup>2</sup> For you have made the city a heap,  the fortified city a ruin;  the palace of foreigners is a city no more;  it will never be rebuilt.</p> <p><sup>3</sup> Therefore strong peoples will glorify you;  cities of ruthless nations will fear you.</p>
	<p><sup>4</sup> For you have been a refuge to the poor,  a refuge to the needy in their distress,  a shelter from the rainstorm and a shade from the heat.  When the blast of the ruthless was like a winter rainstorm,  <sup>5</sup> the noise of foreigners like heat in a dry place,  you subdued the heat with the shade of clouds;  the song of the ruthless was stilled.</p>
<b>ZION – THE TEMPLE CITY</b>	<p><sup>6</sup> On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for all peoples  a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines,  of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear.</p>
	<p><sup>7</sup> And he will destroy on this mountain  the shroud that is cast over all peoples,  the covering that is spread over all nations;  <sup>8</sup> he will swallow up death forever.  Then the Lord GOD will wipe away the tears from all faces,  and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth,  for the LORD has spoken.</p>
	<p><sup>9</sup> It will be said on that day,  “See, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might  save us.  This is the LORD for whom we have waited;  let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.”  <sup>10</sup> For the hand of the LORD will rest on this mountain.</p>

## A TALE OF TWO CITIES

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The world has stood and watched in horror over the past week as events have unfolded in Israel and the Gaza Strip. It can be hard to process our feelings of shock, revulsion, anger, sorrow, and anxiety. And it's so tempting to feel despair—despair at a conflict that's raged over the decades in seemingly unending cycles of mistrust, fear, hatred, and violence. And that's just *our response*—we who stand, for the most part, at several steps removed from the *actual* violence and those directly affected by it. Imagine how Israelis and Palestinians feel right now—those thousands who have lost actual friends and family or who face the real possibility of doing so. Or those living with the terror of being held hostage by people they know would kill them without flinching. Imagine the terror of their families. Imagine the terror of Israelis, now facing conflict on three fronts. Imagine the terror of Palestinians living in the Gaza Strip as it is starved of supplies and electricity and pummelled by overwhelming military force, knowing many more will die before this is over. Think how *powerless* those on both sides feel before forces seeking their destruction.

The biblical writers were familiar with such fear and suffering. I can't help but think of the book of Lamentations—five poems that depict the condition of Jerusalem after its decimation at the hands of the Babylonians in the sixth century BC. Their once-beautiful city now lies in ruins: its defensive walls broken down; its houses, palace, and temple mere rubble; its key population dead or deported. In the poems, those left behind recall the siege of the city: the starvation and the death, and then the indiscriminate violence of the final collapse. And now there is nothing left. Even God has abandoned them. They weep, they rage, they despair, they cry out for mercy—indeed, the whole book is a plea for God to have pity—but God remains silent.

It seems frivolous or trivial to speak of hope in such situations. However, there comes a time when we *have* to speak of hope, for without hope we surrender to despair and paralysis in the face the darkness. And our Isaiah passage today speaks hope to those who have felt powerless in the face of forces working to their harm. And in many and various situations, some relatively minor and others truly huge, most of us have felt this kind of powerless at times. So I would like to unpack the vision a little bit.

This prophetic oracle in the book of Isaiah was given to a people who had experienced very real tyranny, suppression, abuse, and assault in various forms. Fear for the future was a lived reality for them. And the prophet offers up to their imaginations the vision of a world made different.

We could call this oracle, and the larger book of Isaiah, ‘a tale of two cities’ for we see a conflict between the oppressive city and the city of God. These two cities are pictured in very abstracted, generalized, and poetic ways in the oracle, but the imagery was obviously inspired by experiences of real cities: on the one hand Zion, the city of Jerusalem, the city of God; and on the other, cities such as Nineveh and Babylon, the capital cities of powerful (and often brutal) empires. Zion had for a long time been pulverised beneath the feet of such global empires, but in this vision the situation is suddenly transformed. In verses 1–3 the poet rejoices that the oppressive city has been reduced to a pile of rubble.

And here’s a place to pause: perhaps even a *learning* place for us. If you’re anything like me, your first thought might be, “Great! But how can you rejoice at the destruction of a city? That makes you as bad as those who oppress you.” And there *is* an insight in that complaint. *But . . .* I remember being brought up short by survivor of an attempted genocide who pointed out that I was looking from the perspective of someone *far* removed from the situations of visceral fear the prophet speaks into. I could be detached. I wasn’t someone living through years of violence directed against myself and my friends, family, and neighbours. From the perspective of the victim, sometimes liberation from oppression does not come wrapped in pretty paper and tied with a bow. Sometimes it looks like the crippling *defeat* of one’s enemy. And the destruction of the oppressive city is a joy, not because of the *pain* it causes to the oppressors, but because it breaks their power to harm others—forever. *That is* why the collapse of the city is a cause of celebration.

And in verses 4–5 God is praised because in the crushing of the city he has stepped in between the victims and their enemies, providing relief and offering protection. The enemies are indeed *ruthless*: they are like lashing rain in a winter rainstorm; they are like the burning sun in a parched desert. But God has proved himself to be a *shelter* from that rain, a *shade* from that sun, a *strong tower* of refuge from that assault. In the vision, God has stepped in to keep the vulnerable safe.

The prophet then turns to consider the *second* city, the city set on a mountain—which everyone in the audience knows is Mount Zion, the mountain on which the temple in

Jerusalem is built. To speak of Jerusalem in terms of the mountain is to speak of it as a *temple* city. And why does that matter? Because temples in the ancient world were seen as palaces of gods. And the temple in Jerusalem was no different: it was the house of the god of Israel, the creator of the cosmos. OK. Let's be clear. They weren't stupid. They realised that God couldn't be contained by their temple—God couldn't even be contained by the universe, for goodness sake! But the temple represented for them God's desire to live in their midst. It spoke of the centrality of divine *presence* and *blessing* to their vision of the good life.

Zion is the city that has suffered so deeply. Now in the prophet's vision it is exalted as a place of pilgrimage, where people come to the temple to feast at a banquet. This is *holy communion*—feasting together with God, in God's house, at God's invitation. Our Eucharist today is an anticipation of this very banquet, reminding us of the Isaiah vision.

But here is the truly *astonishing* thing to observe in the passage. Notice to *whom* the invitation goes out. Israel? Of course. But not *only* Israel. "On this mountain the LORD of hosts will make for *all peoples* a feast of rich food." *All* peoples. Not simply all *people*—all individuals. All *peoples*—that is to say, all people-groups. And that *includes* the peoples of the formerly oppressive cities. You don't believe me? Take a look at v. 3. "Therefore, strong peoples will glorify you [God]; cities of ruthless nations will fear you."<sup>1</sup> These strong and ruthless peoples are the oppressors whose city is now rubble. But in this vision, their calamity is not intended to wipe them from existence. It is the shock to the system that enables them to embark in humility on a journey towards God, and towards the very people they had formerly oppressed. A journey that leads them eventually to be welcomed into God's feast as his surprise guests. In Scripture divine judgment, while it wounds, is always ultimately aimed towards salvation. The final horizon is blessing not curse, life not death.

There is a lot that this sketchy vision *doesn't* address, to do with confession and repentance, restitution and reconciliation. These are very important matters, and there can be great harm in skipping in a blasé way on a short cut to forgiveness. The road to reconciliation is hard for *all* involved. However, this vision has a different focus. It's not trying to say *everything* that needs saying. It is trying to say *something* that needs saying: namely, that God's future is not ultimately a future in which the oppressed are rescued and their oppressors damned. As theologian Jürgen Moltmann writes: "The message of the new righteousness ... says that in fact the executioners will *not* finally triumph over their victims. It *also* says that in

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<sup>1</sup> Glorifying God = worship; fearing God = obeying God.

the end the victims will not triumph over their *executioners*. The [one who triumphs is *Christ*,] who *first* died for the victims *and then also* for the executioners, and in so doing revealed a new righteousness which breaks through the vicious circles of hate and vengeance and which, from the lost victims and executioners, creates ... a new humanity.” (*Crucified God*, 178)

The prophet is asking his struggling audience to imagine and hope for a future that not only involves *their own* liberation but also, *eventually*, their communing with God together with *all* nations, *including* those who wounded them. The *ultimate* goal, the ultimate *hope* is not of two cities in conflict but of all peoples of every tribe and nation united in the feast of God.

What I am saying is that a future in which victims are saved at the expense of the victimizers is not the best for either the victimizer *or the victim*. What I am saying is that eventual reconciliation is better than eternal estrangement and alienation. Better for *all* parties. What I am saying is that my salvation depends in part upon the salvation of other people, with whom I am inextricably entangled, whether I like it or not. Can I *imagine* such a world? Can I *hope* and *long* for it? I am not asking if you can imagine the *route* to that goal; how we go from here to there. That route is often beyond our ken. I am asking: Can I see it as a good? As desirable? As something to live towards?

Keeping such a universal vision as the ultimate horizon of one's hope keeps *reconciliation* as the goal towards which one is working, *right now*, here in the present. Is this not the vision that inspired Jesus to teach us to love our enemies, to bless those who curse us, to forgive those who sin against us. And is this not the vision we participate in as we share the Eucharistic feast together?

Yet it can seem so unrealistic, so unlike real life. Can we have such hope without living in a fantasy world? The first thing to say is that this prophetic vision is not intended to lead us to deny the often-harsh reality of life in the world. The biblical texts face often inexplicable suffering and sin with brutal honesty, without whitewashing it. There is no denial here. But at the same time, biblical texts embrace hope, even in the midst of the darkness. This is exemplified nowhere more clearly than in the gospel itself, which holds together the *death* and *resurrection* of Christ as fundamental. Crucifixion is *not* pretty. It is *not* just. It is *not* good. But it is a non-negotiable component of our gospel story. At the same time, the death of Jesus without the resurrection is *no gospel at all*. It's a story in which death has the last word. The gospel holds out the hope of resurrection to those who live in a world of death. And what

makes it more than wishful thinking is that Christ has been raised from the dead. *That* is the triumph of life and the basis of our hope.

The vision in Isaiah points towards this. In vv. 7–8 the LORD says that on Mount Zion he will destroy the shroud that is cast over all peoples. The shroud in question is death. Death casts its shadow over *all* of us. No one is exempt. And no one is exempt from the grief and sorrow it brings in its wake. Death swallows us all. But, says the prophet, the LORD will one day swallow the great swallower—death itself will die, forever.

Christians cannot hear this without thinking of Jesus. The gospel is the story of God standing among us, as one of us, in solidarity with fragile, sinful, broken humanity. In Christ, God knows what it is to be rendered powerless and humiliated in the face of oppressors. He knows what it is to descend to the most hopeless place of all—to be swallowed by death. And it is *there*, beyond the reach of hope, that hope is reborn. For through his resurrection Christ destroys the power of death to hold us. He defangs death. He *transforms* death from a dungeon into a doorway, a path to eternal life. He turns it from a full stop to a comma. It is no longer the *end* of our song but simply a pause before it continues, transposed into a new key. He opens the way to a world in which God himself reaches out his hand and wipes away our tears.

This is the ultimate hope of the church: a world without enmity, without sorrow, without death. It is a hope that has inspired creative pathways to conflict resolution. It is a hope that has inspired and lifted up the downcast and downtrodden, given them the strength to keep on going. It is a vision that says: In the end, all shall be well. And if all is not well right now then take heart, this is not the end.