

Liturgy of the Palms / Liturgy of the Passion

WALTER BRUEGGEMANN ON THE LITURGY OF THE PASSION

(Isaiah 50:4-9a)

The voice that speaks in Isaiah 50:4 – 9a is the poet of the exile himself. Here he offers an autobiographical reflection on his call as a prophet sent by God to the deported Jews in Babylon in the sixth century BCE. His message to the Jews is they are now free to go back home to Jerusalem. This freedom came, says the poet, because of the dispatch of Cyrus the Persian at the behest of YHWH, the Lord of all of history.

The poet, and his poetry, is completely preoccupied with the presence, purpose, and person of YHWH. In this short poetic unit, “the Lord God” is named four times. The utterance of the name makes available to both the speaker and to his listeners the entire historical memory of YHWH, “the Lord God.” Specifically it is this singular God who is remembered in the poetry of Isaiah as the one who had enacted the ancient Exodus and who will now enact a new Exodus back home from Babylon in the sixth century (see 43:14-21). Thus the message is emancipation from imperial control, just when the conclusion had been drawn by his Jewish contemporaries that the empire of Babylon and the gods of Babylon had claimed complete control. Consequently the “Lord God” is rendered an historical irrelevance. But the poet, by daring utterance revived YHWH as the God of the Gospel (40:9; 52:7), the good news of freedom. In 50:4-5, the poet asserts of himself:

- that he was properly instructed by YHWH so that he knew how to sustain Israel
- that he has been attentively obedient to that divine instruction.

The poet reflects on the fact that his message from God concerning emancipation evoked enormous hostility. His adversaries struck him, pulled his beard, insulted him, and spit on him. They sought to in every way to humiliate and discredit him. The poet does not identify his adversaries. It is possible that they were Babylonian authorities who did not want his message of freedom heard. Alternatively, his adversaries might be Jews who have settled in to the imperial economy of Babylon and did not want to go home. Either way, they refused his gospel of homecoming, and so sought to silence the messenger.

In the last two citations of the divine name, the poet tells how he responded to such abuse (vv. 7-9). His face was as tough as flint; he did not yield. The reason he did not blink is that the Lord God helped him. Indeed he uses the term “help” twice. We do not know the form of such divine help; we only know that he found courage and energy for the gospel that was entrusted to him.

Apparently he was subject to formal charges as a subversive or as a false messenger. Either that,

or the poetry uses such references metaphorically. He uses juridical language concerning a) those who want to “declare him guilty” and, b) God who “vindicates.” The two terms, “guilty” and “vindicate,” are in fact “guilty or innocent.” While charged as “guilty,” it is the power of YHWH to resist and so thwart such charges. In the end, his adversaries will either “wear out” or be “eaten up.” Either way, they cannot prevail against the resolve of YHWH to vindicate.

The church has read this poem (and others like it) with reference to Jesus, accepting that Jesus is the one who speaks these words. It is Jesus who was well instructed in gospel news, who was utterly obedient to that mandate, and who faced adversaries who put him on trial, but who (in Easter action) is vindicated by God.

In order to link this text to Jesus in the interpretive imagination of the church, we must consider his gospel (see Mark 1:14-15). His message is that the reign of God has begun in his person, and therefore the authority of the Roman Empire (and of its Jewish colluders) is overthrown. We know, of course, that this message of Gospel freedom from imperial authority evoked huge hostility from both Roman authorities and from Jewish authorities, both of whom defended the status quo and did not want voiced a message of alternative freedom.

Thus the self-reflection of Isaiah is readily transposed into the self-reflection of Jesus. In Christian faith, Jesus is the Son who appeals to the authority of the Father. The four-fold “Lord God” refers to the Father who authorized the Son and who vindicates the Son in the wonder of Easter. With both Isaiah and Jesus, the message is emancipation from imperial authority for an alternative life of freedom in obedience only to God. In both cases, the message evokes hostility, and in both cases the messenger is ultimately vindicated and not defeated by the empire.

If we consider how this text might touch our contemporary life, we may consider that in the United States (and in many other places) life is propelled by a predatory economy backed by the claims and force of empire, in the case of the United States by the market ideology of consumerism backed by a culture of militarism. In such a context, the God of emancipation no doubt dispatches messengers (artists, activists, preachers, reformers) who invite people to resist the market ideology of the US Empire for the sake of a very different life of neighborliness. Such a message includes a critique of the predatory economy and anticipates alternative forms of social life. This message readily evokes hostility from the beneficiaries of the status quo and those who unwittingly support the status quo even when it is against their own vested interest. It is not difficult, in the wake of Isaiah and Jesus, to imagine in our contemporary society the same sort of gospel. It features those who are schooled in critique and alternative, and who are obedient by act and by word in a way that deconstructs the claims of the US Empire and invites to another way in the world. Empires and their colluders—whether Pharaoh’s Egypt, Nebuchadnezzar’s Babylon, Caesar’s Rome or our own empire—are acutely vigilant about such subversions.

But in every such circumstance we dare imagine that the God of the gospel dispatches agents to

the contrary. In the horizon of the empire, such voices of alternative are readily “declared guilty.” It is only a daring divine confirmation of faith that leads to a deeper vindication of such voices. In the process, such a male advocate may expect to have his whiskers pulled. And a female advocate may anticipate other forms of abuse. That abuse notwithstanding, the gospel of an alternative way in the world is made available; and those who live it are vindicated! As we ponder in Lent the conflict of Jesus with the empire, we readily see how disturbingly contemporary the issue of this text is. The empire will hardly ever tolerate a well-instructed, obedient advocate of alternative. But the text witnesses to the power of God on behalf of such faithful advocates.

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