

May 4, 2003
Saint Thomas Sunday

Father Pat's Pastoral Ponderings

Augustine of Hippo, after his spiritual conversion in 386, and in preparation for his planned baptism in Milan during the Easter vigil in the following spring, was wondering which part of Holy Scripture he should read by way of making his heart ready for that great event. So, from his retreat at Cassiacum, he wrote to Ambrose, the bishop of Milan, seeking his counsel on the matter. Augustine's recollection of that occasion is worth citing at length: "By letter I informed Your bishop Ambrose, that holy man, both of my former errors and present intention, so that he could advise me as to which of Your books it would be best for me to read, so that I could become more prepared and better fitted to receive so great a grace. He recommended the prophet Isaiah. I believe that he did so because this is a more manifest prophet of the Gospel and of the calling of the Gentiles than are the other writers" (Confessions 9.5.13). Alas, Augustine went on to note, he was unable to understand Isaiah at that time and was obliged to put it aside until he became more mature in the Christian faith.

This is sometimes the case with Isaiah. He is not easy. Reading him requires spiritual maturity. The biblical scholar Sheldon Blank wrote of Isaiah: "If you hear him you grow confused because he upsets your notions, if you go with him you run into trouble because you are pushing against the crowd, if you deny him you feel guilty because you know he is right."

However difficult Isaiah can be to understand at times, it would be even more difficult to overestimate the importance of this prophet in Christian theology. After the Psalter, in fact, the New Testament cites the Book of Isaiah more often than any other work of the Old Testament, and so vivid and detailed were his prophecies of Christ our Lord that he has been called "the fifth evangelist."

God's call to Isaiah came in an overwhelming experience of the divine holiness. He himself recorded the very year of the event; it was 742 B.C., "the year that King Uzziah died." While in prayer in the temple, Isaiah beheld the Lord, high and lifted up, so that his train filled the entire structure. Isaiah heard the solemn, alternate chant of those mysterious

beings of fire, the Seraphim, six-winged, many-eyed, soaring aloft, borne on their pinions, singing the triumphal hymn, shouting, proclaiming and saying: "Holy, holy, holy is the Lord of hosts; the whole earth is full of His glory."

Suddenly Isaiah felt himself filthy and soiled: "Woe is me," he confessed, "for I am undone! Because I am a man of unclean lips, and I dwell in the midst of a people of unclean lips; for my eyes have seen the King, the Lord of hosts." At this point one of the Seraphim, approached the altar in the temple with a pair of tongs and removed a burning coal. This fiery ember, so hot that even the angel of fire dared not touch it except with tongs, he rammed into the mouth of Isaiah, purging his lips so that he might proclaim God's holy prophetic Word.

After his overwhelming experience of the divine holiness, Isaiah was never again the same. Throughout the rest of the book that bears Isaiah's name, God is called "the Holy One of Israel." This expression is peculiarly Isaian. It is found twenty-six times throughout the diverse parts of the Book of Isaiah, whereas it appears only six other times in the remainder of the Hebrew Bible.

But God, we know, cannot be seen. In fact, "no one has seen God at any time." In what sense did Isaiah see Him? When Isaiah, as he said, "saw the Lord sitting on a throne, high and lifted up," just whom did he behold? Just whose glory, filling heaven and earth, did the prophet contemplate?

The Gospel of St. John explicitly answers this question. St. John, to interpret and explain the hardness of heart that Jesus met from His enemies from the officialdom of Judah, quotes two verses from the very chapter in which Isaiah's described his vision in the temple (Isaiah 6:9-10; John 12:40). These things were all prophesied by Isaiah, John says. Then, John goes on explicitly to identify Jesus as the figure that Isaiah beheld in that vision in the temple: "These things Isaiah said when he saw His glory and spoke of Him" (12:41).

It was this vision of Isaiah in the temple, then, that has prompted Christians to refer to that ancient prophet as "the fifth evangelist." It was granted to Isaiah, seven and a half centuries before the Incarnation, to behold in mystic, prophetic illumination "the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ" (2 Corinthians 4:6). That prophet, who knew very well that "no one has seen God at any time," nonetheless perceived in his prophetic summons that "the only begotten Son, who is in the bosom of the Father, He

has declared Him" (John 1:18). Isaiah was, as Augustine said, the "more manifest prophet of the Gospel."

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