

Study 10: Holy, Holy, Holy

Introduction. So far we have taken a wide-angle view of the beginnings of God's plan for our happiness, a plan reaches its fulfillment in Christ and His Mystical Body, the one, holy, Catholic, and apostolic Church. We have seen that many of the events which shaped this plan are not dead history, but rather are of real importance to us today, right here, right now. God has said to us: "*You will be my people, and I will be your God.*" And so we are the People of God! We are Abraham's children by faith. We are united in sharing the New Covenant, just as the Israelites shared in the Old Covenant. We know the dynamic force of God's Law in our lives just as the author of Deuteronomy did. And we look forward to entering the Promised Land of Heaven.

Now we will embark on a new phase of God's activities in human history: the period from the Exile (8th Century B.C.) to the time of the Roman occupation (1st Century B.C.). One of the most striking features of this second stage of God's dealings with His People is the growing refinement and deepening of their knowledge of God and their own place in God's plan. Prior to this, God's preparation of His people was largely external, as they became a nation with a law and a land of their own. But now God intensifies their internal development, and it is the prophets whom God trusts to aid in this development.

We have already met the prophet Amos, God's messenger, who brought a message of justice to Israel, the Northern Kingdom. We now meet one of the greatest of the prophets, Isaiah, the first of the Major Prophets in the Old Testament canon. Isaiah tells the faithless people of the South, the Kingdom of Judah, about God's holiness, and the very real consequences of this for mankind.

Authorship and timing. When studying Isaiah we quickly encounter controversy. Many Scriptural critics argue for *three different* Isaiahs: (1) the original Isaiah of Jerusalem who begins his prophetic work in 740 B.C., "the year King Uzziah died"; (2) a second Isaiah operating in Babylon during the exile; and (3) a third Isaiah after that. The third Isaiah is perhaps the least likely as his "book" seems to be really just a loose anthology of oracles. As for the second Isaiah, unlike Ezekiel who clearly states that he was in Babylon during the exile and supports this with plenty of local commentary, there is little in chapters 40-55 of Isaiah to suggest Babylon. Indeed, Isaiah appeals to those Jews remaining in Jerusalem and when speaking of idolatry, speaks of Canaanite not Babylonian idolatry. (Also, Ezekiel states that he is the only prophet in Babylon [Ezek 2:5; 22:30].

Was there a second Isaiah? In my very humble opinion, no. This, of course, puts me at odds with many (probably a majority) of modern Scriptural scholars, who believe that there is little to connect the writings of the first and second Isaiah. To me this is a weak argument, for if it's true, why add the second's work to the original Isaiah in the first place? I believe it's more likely that, despite some obvious explanatory entries by postexilic scribes, what we have in Isaiah is an anthology of pieces from the different periods of the long life of a prophet. After all, Isaiah tells us in the opening verse that he lived through four reigns of the kings of Judah.

You need not accept my conclusions, or those of the modern scholars. The important thing is *what* Isaiah is telling God's People and what Isaiah is telling us.

Background. The days of Isaiah (8th Century B.C.) were evil times indeed. The bitterness of the civil strife between the North (Israel) and the South (Judah) during the 10th Century B.C. had resulted in undying hostility and hatred. This enmity divided the two kingdoms like a wall.

To complicate things, each passing day brought continued expansion of Assyria's terrible military machine. By Isaiah's time in the 8th Century, Assyria was threatening the two tiny Hebrew kingdoms. It seemed inevitable that little Israel and Judah would be crushed beneath the weight of Assyria's war machine.

Like Israel, its neighbor to the north, Judah was a sick society, as evidenced by its merciless oppression of its poor. False religions, with their savage practices of sacrificing innocent children to their blood-thirsty gods, had taken root. Sexual depravity had been turned into a religious act. As Isaiah preached on the

temple steps, the smoke of fires where children were burned alive in sacrifice to Moloch, the god of the Phoenicians, darkened the skies in the very heart of God's Holy City. It was a time of intrigue, where men abandoned God and looked to political alliances with undependable Egypt and brutal Assyria as the best means to save their country from extinction. Men abandoned the Covenant with Almighty God and instead made covenants with earthly powers.

Reading. Now open your Bible and read:

Isaiah 6-12 – The call of the prophet and the Emmanuel Prophecies

Isaiah 42-53 – The Servant Songs

Isaiah is a beautifully written book and to appreciate this, you might want to pay particular attention to the following passages:

Isaiah 5:1-7 -- The Song of the Vineyard

Isaiah 11:1-16 – The Golden Age

Isaiah 12:1-6 – The Song of Thanksgiving

Isaiah 14:3-23 – The Satire on Babylon

Behind the Words. Although we can't say for certain, the Book of Isaiah might well have been assembled by the disciples of the prophet some years after his death. In doing so they seem to have made no real attempt to arrange the sermons and poems in any kind of strict chronological order. Nor did they give the book a story thread on which to hang the various selections. As a result Isaiah comes across as a kind of anthology of the prophet's words.

As for Isaiah himself, he was a member of the upper class, the Judean nobility. He therefore had easy access to the king and other high officials, and seems to have played the role of elder statesman during much of his career. Despite his deep insight into the awesome holiness of God, Isaiah did not separate himself from the world and he was a keen observer of his times. He was both mystic and politician. We meet the former in chapter 6 when he is enraptured with a vision of God's majesty; and the latter in chapter 7 when he discusses affairs of state with King Ahaz. His political astuteness is evident in his advised policy of neutrality and non-intervention in the fierce struggle between Egypt and Assyria-Babylon for control of the ancient world. Putting aside religious grounds, even on merely practical level Isaiah's policy might well have been the only course that could have saved the national integrity of Judah.

Some Key Passages. I suggest that you mark and pay particular attention to the following passages in your Bible:

Isaiah 6:1-13 – The Call of the Prophet. This vision sets the tone for the whole of Isaiah's mission: to be the messenger of God's holiness. In the Old Testament holiness meant to be separated from that which is base or impure. Applied to God it signified His transcendence; i.e., His complete apartness and distinction from all that He had created. [It's interesting to note that the term "Pharisee", which we encounter in the New Testament, means *the separated one*. The Pharisees saw themselves as separated from the majority of the people, the poor and ignorant of the Law, and were therefore free from any contamination.]

In His holiness, God stands completely above and apart from His creation. But this is not the whole story, for God's holiness is active and makes demands on us. He wants His creation to share in His holiness. (Because God is holy, He makes holy.) In Isaiah, then, we get a first glimpse of the great mystery of Grace and Redemption. God wishes His creation to share in His holiness, and He wishes us to share in His divine life!

- *Isaiah 6:1* – Note that the vision takes place in the Temple. Previously God’s appearances to men have occurred almost exclusively in desert places. In Isaiah’s vision God is enthroned in His own house, in a formal place of worship.
- *Isaiah 6:5* – It’s interesting to compare the largely traditional attitude expressed by Isaiah with Gideon’s vision in Judges 6:22-24 and that of Manoah in Judges 13:9-23.
- *Isaiah 6:18-13* – Here we find a perfect description of the prophet’s vocation. People commonly consider the prophet to be one who foretells the future, but this gift is only incidental to the prophet’s true mission. The word “prophet” really means *one who speaks for another*. The prophet was to speak *for God to the king and the people*. In one sense he was the national conscience, and in this role it might sometimes be necessary to emphasize the future results of present conduct. This, however, was not a necessary or primary function of the prophet’s work as a messenger of God.
- *Isaiah 6:9-13* – This description of Isaiah’s life work might be a bit surprising. But God is describing to Isaiah how his message will actually be received by the people. God’s Word always demands and receives a response from us. Even when we ignore God’s Word, we are still responding. Indeed, we can describe the Bible as a dialogue between God and man

Isaiah 7-11 – The Emmanuel Prophecies. During this period (742-725 B.C.) Assyria was an ever-expanding menace to the independence of the small kingdoms of Palestine and Syria. Having secured the unreliable backing of Egypt (a mere shell of the earlier, powerful empire), three of these tiny kingdoms formed a coalition under the leadership of the city of Damascus. But King Ahaz of Judah refused to join the league. This decision was disastrous to the league’s plans since Judah was the overland link with Egypt in the event they would need military assistance from the south. And so the coalition decided to march on Judah, dethrone Ahaz, and replace him with one of their own. At the time of this meeting between Ahaz and Isaiah, word had just reached Jerusalem that the coalition was marching against it. The two likely met during an inspection tour of the fortifications. [See 2 Kings 16:1-20]

- *Isaiah 7:14-15* – Here the prophet introduces us to a new character in the Biblical drama: Emmanuel, which in Hebrew means *God with us*. Scriptural scholars have suggested various explanations for this passage. Some claim that Emmanuel refers to a future son of Ahaz, while others tell us it refers to Isaiah’s son. And some say it relates to the coming Messiah. This last, of course, is the traditional explanation given by both Judaism and Christianity. As Christians we also encounter a direct connection between Jesus Christ and Emmanuel in Matthew’s Gospel when the angel appears to Joseph in a dream and clearly states “...they shall call Him Emmanuel” [Matthew 1:23]. And so, by the light of faith, we see that this revelation to Isaiah was merely a first step to a complete and definitive fulfillment in the virgin-birth of Christ.

Isaiah 42-53 – The Songs of the Suffering Servant. These poems are so-called because they describe another mysterious person identified only a “My Servant.”

- *Song #1: Isaiah 42:1-4.* God presents His servant to the heavenly court. Here we find a description of the servant’s mission: He is to be the patient teacher of the true faith to all of humanity. The song also forms an interesting backdrop to the Baptism of Jesus in the Jordan [Mark 1:9-13].
- *Song #2: Isaiah 49:1-6* – Here the servant speaks out to the entire world. Note that, like Christ, the servant takes his mission first to the “lost sheep of the House of Israel” but will apparently [Isaiah 49:6] leave this work incomplete and turn to the nations.
- *Song #3: Isaiah 50:4-9* – Here we encounter the servant’s Gethsemane; and yet, even in the face of suffering, he does not lose confidence in the fulfillment of his mission.
- *Song #4: Isaiah 52:13-53:12* – This most important of the songs forms a striking portrait of the *Man of Sorrows*.

Who is the servant? Jewish scholars have identified the servant with the messiah to come, or with the nation itself, or with the faithful few in every generation. Until the 19th Century, Christian scholars were unanimous in identifying the servant with Jesus Christ. Many modern scholars, however, have rejected this interpretation. But such a rejection runs counter to consistent Church teaching over the centuries. Jesus chose to fulfill this ideal (the suffering servant) in His own Person, and the Church, under the guidance of the Holy Spirit, has always seen in these passages a remarkable prophetic vision of the mission, passion, and death of our Lord, Jesus Christ.

Unity of the Two Testaments. The Book of the Prophet Isaiah has often been called a pre-Christian Gospel. Certainly few other books of the Old Testament are quoted as frequently by the Evangelists, and where Isaiah is not directly quoted, the Gospels often allude to him. Just as St. Paul is called the *Apostle*, and St. Thomas Aquinas, the *Theologian*, Isaiah is well-termed, the *Prophet*. Just scan the marginal cross-references found in the Gospels and note how many refer to the Book of Isaiah.

Look particularly at the following passages from Isaiah and the associated New Testament passages and see connections you can make:

Is 6:9-10 (Luke 8:10; Luke 12:54-56; Luke 7:31-32; 1 John 4:20)

Is 7:14-16 (Matthew 1:20-23; Mark 2:8-12; John 14:23)

Is 9:6-7 (Mark 4:39; Luke 13:34-35; John 14:25-27; Luke 1:31-33; Hebrews 13:7)

Is 50:5-7 (Luke 9:22; Luke 9:44; Luke 18:31-33; Mark 15:15-20; 2 Timothy 1:12)

Is 52:13-53:12 (Philippians 2:6-11; Acts 1:8; John 12:37-39; Luke 4:29; John 2:23-25; Romans 11:33; John 3:16-17; Revelation 5:9; Matthew 26:47-54; Philippians 2:12)

The liturgies of both Advent and Lent are immersed in the Book of Isaiah. Again and again we come across the very words of the Prophet himself, as we encounter the great images of both Emmanuel and the Suffering Servant. With the exception of the Book of Psalms, no other Old Testament book has had a greater impact on the liturgy. Glance through the Masses of Advent, Christmas, Lent and Holy Week and note the influence of Isaiah on these special liturgical seasons.

Questions. Reflect on the following questions offered for discussion:

1. How does the second period in the development of God's plan differ from the first period?
2. What do we mean when we say that Isaiah is the Prophet of God's Holiness?
3. How would you define a prophet?
4. Why did Isaiah have such easy access to the king?
5. Do you see any similarities between the political situation of Isaiah's day and our own? (Expand your view when considering this question.)
6. What do you think is the most characteristic feature of Isaiah's message? Can we learn anything from this with respect to our own religious attitudes?
7. How do you account for Ahaz's attitude in Isaiah 7:14-16?
8. What do you think of the prophet's insight into sin and suffering?
9. What do the figures of Emmanuel and the Servant tell us of the Messiah to come?