

THE LORD'S INTERVENTION

Isaiah 64:1-9

Life goes on from day to day. To an unspiritual eye the Lord is like a person who winds a clock, and goes away, leaving it to tick on by itself. Many people think about God only when their troubles get so serious that they despair of being able to cope. Then they wish the Lord would come and intervene on their behalf.

The passage Isaiah 64:1-9 addresses this question. As always, there is ambivalence about the Lord's coming to rescue. The people wanted the Lord to come to deliver them from their enemies, who were also His enemies. He had intervened like that in the past in awesome ways. There was indeed no other God except Him. In the past He had done what no one had ever seen or heard about. He had delivered His people in miraculous ways. They hoped that He would do so again in impressive ways, rending the heavens, like a person ripping a tent open, and revealing the fierce heat of His anger on His enemies, as when fire sets dry twigs ablaze and causes water to boil. That was the kind of intervention from God that they hoped for. Then His enemies would know Him, and the nations would tremble before Him.

However, there is ambivalence about the Lord's coming. Had they deserved His intervention? What if, when He intervened, He turned against them for their guilt? Salvation does not only mean deliverance from enemies from without, but deliverance from our own sinful selves. The Lord has no favourites. Asking the Lord to intervene is a precarious act because He is a God of strict justice and righteous anger besides being a God of mercy and compassion.

It was like that when Malachi broached the prospect of the coming Day of the Lord. "But who can endure the day of His coming? Who can stand on the day when He appears? For He will be like a refiner's fire, and like launderers' soap. And He will sit down like a refiner and a purifier of silver." It is a precarious thing to ask the Lord to intervene with His enemies if His intervention will strike us too.

Isaiah recognised the Lord's strict justice and righteous anger when he acknowledged, "You come to him who gladly does what is right, and those who remember You according to Your ways." Although they knew that the Lord had been angry, they had been sinning against His ways for a long time. Their need drove them to turn to Him, but, if He came in strict justice, their situation would be far worse.

In Romans chapters one to three Paul acknowledged that the nations without the Law had turned away from God, so that His wrath was revealed against them. The Israelites, who had the Law, were in no position to gloat, because they had not kept the Law either. All alike were sinful, and had fallen short of the glory of God. Isaiah expresses the same thoughts in striking pictures. One is person with a terrible disease, which has made him unclean. However, the uncleanness also involved Old Testament ideas of ceremonial uncleanness, such as a discharge that made a garment filthy. Asking the Lord to come to intervene is a risky thing when we have to acknowledge, "All of us have withered like a leaf and all our wrongdoings carry us away like the wind. There is no one who calls on Your Name, or rouses himself to take hold of You. For You have hidden Your face from us, and You have made us melt on account of our sins"

What claim can we, who are all in a similar situation, make on God to come in mercy instead of in righteous anger? All we can do is to ask the Lord to be merciful for His own sake, because it is His nature to be merciful. Our confidence rests on a conviction that He is slow to anger, and would rather forgive than punish.

In this passage this conviction that the Lord is merciful is the basis for the prayer that, after all, He would tear the heavens apart and come down. Isaiah expresses it in the statement: "You are our Father." We are so accustomed in the New Testament to calling God "Father" that we tend to forget that in the Old Testament this conception of God was found only infrequently. Perhaps it was because the false worship of Baal had introduced pagan notions of a "father" sending rain like sperm to make mother earth fertile. Yet the Israelites knew from their God's revelation that they should think of Him as a father carrying his son, in their case, from the land of slavery through the wilderness to their promised land. There was a psalm verse that said, "As a father has compassion on his children, so the LORD has had compassion on those who fear Him." Besides, there is a strand of thought in both the Old Testament and the New that properly links the thought of God as Father with that of vlaker or Creator. The song of Moses in Deuteronomy 32 invoked the thought of God as Father-Maker: "Is He not your Father, your Creator, who made you and formed you?" The early Christian creeds did that, too: "I believe in God the Father almighty, Maker..."

In these chapters of Isaiah there is a clear link between God's dual roles as Father, as Creator and Redeemer. Isaiah 63: 16 based a plea for mercy on this: "For You are our Father, even though Abraham does not know us, and Israel does not recognise us. You, O LORD, are our Father. "Our-Redeemer From Everlasting" is

Your Name!” In this passage the idea of Father as Maker is expressed through the picture of a potter using his hand to shape clay for his purposes. They are purposes that the clay has no right to question even if it could: “But now, O LORD, You are our Father; we are the clay, and You are the potter and we are all the work of Your hand.” In Isaiah 45 there was already a comparison between a potter’s shaping and a father’s begetting, with reference to God: “Woe to the person who quarrels with his Maker, to him who is but a piece of a pot among the potsherds on the ground. Does the clay say to the potter, ‘What are you making?’ Does your work say, ‘He has no hands’? Woe to the person who says to his father, ‘What have you begotten?’ or to his mother, ‘What have you brought to birth?’”

A son or a daughter who has made a mess of life can usually think of home as a place of acceptance and refuge. There, if nowhere else, there may be compassion and acceptance. The prodigal son knew that he had that one place left to return to, in spite of his guilt. Here in Isaiah that relationship with God as Father becomes the basis of a plea for mercy, in spite of everything: “Do not be angry beyond measure, O LORD, and do not remember guilt for ever. Indeed, please look, we are all Your people.”

We do not talk about God’s mercy over against His strict justice and righteous anger without recognising that God has Himself paid the cost of His change in attitude towards us. The cost paid to God’s strict justice and wrath has opened the way for His compassion. The four Messianic songs about the Servant of the Lord say that the Servant who suffers for Israel’s sins has borne them in a redemptive, substitutionary way. The Messiah pours out His soul into death and through this the many are justified. These final chapters of Isaiah are replete with references to the Messiah. He whom the Lord has anointed brings good news for the poor, the broken-hearted, captives, prisoners, those who mourn, grieve, and despair (Isa 61). Paul expressed the same thought. In the redemption in Jesus’ blood God acts justly when He justifies the person who believes in Jesus (Rm 3:24-26).