

Fourth Sunday of Advent, 23rd December 2018

The "voice of one crying in the wilderness (*vox clamantis in deserto*)" (Lk 3:4) may indeed seem a 'far cry' from the hustle and bustle of Christmas, but that is of course all the more reason to stand back for a moment and listen to it. The "voice" of the Baptist also comes to us as a 'far cry' because it was cried a long time ago, far in the distant past: "In the fifteenth year of the reign of Tiberius Caesar, Pontius Pilate being governor of Judea" (Lk 3:1) etc. And not only does the "voice" come as a 'far cry'; it comes as a 'lone voice', a lone "voice" in an equally lonely "wilderness". Is anyone really listening, never mind interested?! A 'lone voice', yes; but one which nevertheless cries out and in a sense gets its message across, despite its being isolated from us, chronologically as well as geographically.

The "voice of him that crieth in the wilderness" - Two weeks ago, I heard these same words sung; no, not in a lonely desert, but in the company of a rather full Hereford Cathedral - "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight [...] a highway for our God" (Is 40:3), as the tenor soloist duly went on to sing in that famous opening from Handel's *Messiah*. While these words appear in today's Gospel, they are taken straight from the prophet Isaiah, as the Gospel itself reminded us: "as it is written in the book of the sayings of Isaias the prophet [...]" (Lk 3:4). And we of course heard, this afternoon, from St Luke's Gospel, the same Gospel that contains the Annunciation and that story of the Nativity which we will perhaps hear once again at Mass tomorrow night.

And it is not only St Luke which has this quotation from "the book of the sayings of Isaias the prophet", as the evangelist correctly calls it (the prophet not having written down his sayings himself as such); but all the other Gospels, including the somewhat *sui generis* St John, quote this part of chapter forty of Isaiah (verse three, to be precise), though St John does in fact condense "Prepare ye the way of the Lord, make straight his paths" (Mt 3:3; Mk 1:3; Lk 3:4) to the shorter "make straight the way of the Lord" (Jn 1:23). And indeed we "prepare [...] the way of the Lord" by making it

"straight", so as for him to tread smoothly upon it and along it, as it were. This, however, is where the Gospels of Matthew, Mark, and John finish their quotation from chapter forty of Isaiah and where Luke, for his part, goes on to quote verses four and five: "Every valley shall be filled; and every mountain and hill shall be brought low; and the crooked shall be made straight; and the rough ways plain; and all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lk 3:5-6).

When the tenor gets to "Every valley [...]", he sings it as an aria, as if to embellish with song the prophet's explanation of how we should prepare; how we should straighten, rather, "the way of the Lord": Watch out Malvern Hills, you're going to get flattened! Do not, however, be unduly alarmed: the call of Isaiah, and as such of St John the Baptist, is of course not about some sort of enormous earth-shifting exercise but of an internal levelling and smoothly out of our own lives, an exercise which we have hopefully taken some time for this Advent (I know: just one more day to go now!).

Then at the end of the aria, the lone "voice [...] in the wilderness" (Is 40:3; Lk 3:4) gives way to the many voices of the choir in the chorus, "And the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together" (Is 40:5). This is the same verse from Isaiah with which St Luke concludes his quotation; and yet, because he is quoting from the Greek Septuagint rather than the Hebrew version of the Old Testament, of Isaiah, it is slightly different: "all flesh shall see the salvation of God" (Lk 3:6), rather than "the glory of the Lord shall be revealed, and all flesh shall see it together". One has "the salvation of God" and the other "the glory of the Lord", but does that really matter? Both of them, however, still tell us that: "all flesh shall see it"; "all mankind", in other words, "shall see it". A nod certainly in the direction of salvation for all, for Gentiles as well as Jews, forming as it does an important component in the Gospel of St Luke, the Gentile convert.

If we were to continue and quote the next verse from Isaiah (verse six, that is, from chapter forty), which neither St Luke nor Handel's libretto in fact does, we would hear another voice: "The

voice of one, saying: Cry. And I said: What shall I cry? All flesh is grass, and all the glory thereof as the flower of the field". This has a somewhat different tone of voice from the fairly triumphant chorus of the preceding verse, although "all flesh" and "glory" again make an appearance here. And while Handel did not go on to include this verse in his oratorio, another German Protestant composer, Brahms, indeed did so in his renowned choral work, an oratorio of sorts, *A German Requiem*.

The change of tone from a jubilant chorus, traditionally sung around Christmas time, to the sombre (though no less loud, and sometimes even louder) chorus in a *Requiem* is truly a reflection upon the frailness, indeed mortality, of human flesh in contrast to the eternal strength of divine glory: "*Denn alles Fleisch, es ist wie Gras* (For all flesh is as grass) *und alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen wie des Grases Blumen* (and all the glory of man as the flower of grass)". Technically, this is a quotation of a quotation, since it is actually St Peter quoting Isaiah in his first epistle (1:24), from Luther's German translation of the Bible. Unlike the Latin Vulgate, the German has "all the glory of man (*alle Herrlichkeit des Menschen*)" instead of "all the glory thereof ["of all flesh", that is]", caused as such by the Greek manuscripts behind Luther's Bible, which also have "man"; probably to help explain to Greek readers that "flesh" is indeed a Hebrew expression for "man", 'mankind'.

Man's own "glory", therefore, is as nothing; man, being made of mortal flesh, has to wait until the true glory, "the glory of the Lord", is "revealed" (Is 40:5). There is, it goes without saying, quite a bit of fake glory floating around; all that glitters, even with a heavy dose of tinsel, is not gold, never mind glory! And all that deafen us should not be made to drown out that lone prophetic voice which continues to call us all to straighten and prepare our hearts for the revealing of the Lord.

But please leave those Hills alone!