

2025.01.05 Isaiah's vision of the restoration of Jerusalem

Like those who listen to Handel's *Messiah* every year, I cannot read these stirring words without hearing that familiar and glorious music in the background. Handel cites Isaiah 40:9 : 'O though that tellest good tidings to Zion, get thee up into the high mountain. say unto the cities of Judah, Behold your God!' then, ignoring the 20 chapters of intervening text, Handel immediately adds Isaiah 60, v.1 'Arise, shine, for thy light is come, and the glory of the Lord is risen upon thee.' With a pause only to toss the narrative to the bass soloist, Handel adds the following two verses from Isaiah 60: 'the Lord shall arise upon thee, and his glory shall be seen upon thee. And the Gentiles shall come to thy light, and kings to the brightness of thy rising.' (Isaiah 60, vv.2–3).

As always in Scripture, context is everything. In the first half of Isaiah 59, the Lord lists all Judah's transgressions, until by 59:9 the community is shamed into confession and repentance (v.12-15). The Lord sees that they have no justice and no leader, and no prospect of redemption after repentance, so decides to step in (v. 16). 'He put on righteousness like a breastplate, and a helmet of salvation on his head....' (v. 17)..... 'And he will come to Zion as Redeemer, to those in Jacob who turn from transgression' (v 20). No prizes for spotting echoes of Paul's armour analogy.

At 59: 21, the text turns from prophesy to promise. The Lord addresses Judah directly, promising 'You' a glorious restoration after repentance. Arabia's riches will flow in to you from Midian, Ephah and Sheba (remote Arab tribes) by camel caravan. Remembering that the "you" in 60: 6 is Judah's landscape rather than a person explains 'A multitude of camels shall cover you'.

Matthew's Gospel is addressed largely to audiences steeped in First Testament writings, and one of his great concerns was to show that Jesus' life and ministry was foretold by ancient prophesy. So it is not hard to see the link between the reference in Isaiah 60:6 to the arrival of kings with their frankincense and gold, and Matt 2:11. More important, we miss the depth of God's compassion for his fallen people, and his gracious forgiveness and restoration as described in Isaiah 60, if we fail to read chapter 59 first.

Kim King