Opinion
Guest Voices



"Prophet Isaiah predicts the return of the Jews from exile" by Maarten van Heemskerck, circa 1560 (RNS/ Wikimedia/Creative Commons/Frans Hals Museum)



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The prophet Isaiah had strong views about political issues of his day, and his words, which Catholics and others who use the Common Lectionary read over the four Sundays of Advent, are impossible to hear without applying them to politics today.

Isaiah started preaching about 750 years before the birth of Christ. At that time, the Jewish nation was divided into two states, with Israel in the north and Judah in the south. Isaiah came from an upper-class family that lived in the south, in Jerusalem, the capital of Judah.

Isaiah lived in a time of international conflict and shifting alliances. Assyria, today's Iraq, was the superpower of that time. At one point, Israel and Syria invaded Judah to force it into an alliance with them against Assyria. Instead, Judah called on Assyria for help, Israel was defeated and Judah became a vassal of Assyria. Later, Judah revolted against Assyria when it was promised help from Egypt. The rebellion was crushed.

These were not good times for Judah and Israel.

> Quoting Isaiah, John the Baptist urges us to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." We do this by promoting justice and peace in our world.

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As a prophet, Isaiah spoke out on these political issues. He believed that international relations should be governed by God's will and not by political expediency. He opposed the alliance of Judah with Assyria against Israel. Later, he opposed the rebellion against Assyria, warning the king not to rely on Egypt.

The king's advisers considered him politically naive and a traitor. Sound familiar? Critics are always condemned as naïve or traitors. Actually, it appears that Isaiah's advice was better than that given to the king by his political experts.

What inspired Isaiah was a vision of God as the Holy One, the true King of Judah. Judah should trust in God and not in princes and chariots.

Judah not only had international problems; it also had domestic problems. The poor were being exploited, so Isaiah also preached about social justice. He believed that a just nation was a strong nation. A nation built on the oppression of the poor was condemned by God and weak in the face of its foes.



David, center wearing purple, is anointed king by Samuel. Image from the Dura Europos Synagogue, Syria, 3rd century CE (RNS/Wikimedia/Creative Commons)

Isaiah lost confidence in Judah's kings even though they were descendants of David. He uses the image of a farmer who cuts back a vine to get rid of the diseased wood. He then says that a new shoot will sprout from the stump of Jesse, the father of David. Isaiah wanted someone from the house of David, but not anyone corrupted by the political machinations of his time.

Isaiah goes on to describe this ideal ruler. First, Isaiah says that the spirit of the Lord will rest upon this person. He then lists what will become known as the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord. These gifts of the Spirit will enable the new king to rule wisely.

Second, this ideal ruler will be a just judge. He will rule with justice toward the poor. Those who ruthlessly exploit the poor will be struck down. His judgments will not be swayed in favor of the rich and powerful.

Finally, Isaiah describes in wonderful images the peaceable kingdom that will result from the wisdom and justice of this ideal ruler. "The wolf shall be a guest of the lamb, and the leopard shall lie down with the kid."

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Isaiah hoped for a human king for Judah. Today as Christians we can see Jesus in this prophecy. He is the one on whom the spirit of the Lord rests; he is the one who is concerned for the poor and the oppressed; he is the one who will judge justly.

But Isaiah's vision for his time is still pertinent to us today. The holiness of God demands that his justice and love rule both the international and domestic affairs of nations. This is why the late Pope Francis and now Pope Leo have so often spoken out on issues of justice and peace. As Pope Paul VI said, "If you want peace, work for justice."

Like Isaiah, we are disappointed with our political leadership. We wish that the spirit of the Lord rested on politicians, but in a democracy, it also must rest on citizens. Politicians and citizens need the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit: wisdom, understanding, counsel, fortitude, knowledge, piety and fear of the Lord; otherwise,

politics will be corrupt and self-serving.

Isaiah's time was one of international conflict and injustice; so too is ours. Today we see wars in Ukraine, the Middle East, Sudan and Congo. We see a world economy that continues to enrich elites while workers get the short end of the stick. The stock market goes up, but wages don't keep up with inflation. Political corruption and crony capitalism are globalized.

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What would Isaiah advise us? Isaiah was both an idealist and a realist. As an idealist, he spoke of social justice and not trusting in weapons of war. As a realist, he cautioned against trusting in princes and alliances. Do not trust the self-styled experts who offer easy answers but are usually wrong.

Today Isaiah would ask why we continue spending billions of dollars for weapons and tax cuts while cutting aid to the hungry, the sick, the unemployed, and victims of wars and climate disasters.

Isaiah would denounce such policies and tell us to seek a kingdom of justice and peace.

During Advent, John the Baptist reminds us that the reign of God is at hand. We must have a change of heart; we must reform our lives — not just our personal lives, our lives as a nation as well.

"Repent, for the kingdom of heaven is at hand!" Quoting Isaiah, John the Baptist urges us to "Prepare the way of the Lord, make straight his paths." We do this by promoting justice and peace in our world.

Isaiah knew what he was talking about, and we should listen to him in Advent and pray that the Spirit of the Lord may be upon us and our nation.