



**Easter 7, Year B – May 24, 2009**

Isaiah 14.3-15

**A Homily preached by the Rev'd Canon M. Ansley Tucker**

Oh, it is the stuff of fairy tales and fables, of operetta and film, isn't? Jack outwits the giant. The tortoise outstrips the hare. The ugly duckling is a swan, Ralph Rackstraw a prince, and Nankipoo a Mikado. Rocky wins big, and David Helfgott commands the concert stage.

And how we enjoy the comeuppance of the braggart, the deflation of the puffed up, and the toppling of the tyrant. We tell these stories to children because children are so obviously the little people. Their views are inclined to be discounted, and they are powerless to prevail over someone bigger and stronger and louder than they (which is to say, an adult.) Or so we imagine. The appeal of these stories is that they dare to suggest otherwise. They turn tyranny on its head, justice is done, and the little person wins the day.

Then comes the day, when we are all grown up, and trying to make our way in a world which seems too complex to parse, too entrenched to change, too corrupt to come clean; and we discover that we are still what Jesus called the "anawim" – the little people. We find ourselves overwhelmed by so much that is not right or kind or fair; and to try and stop it is about like trying to hold back Niagara Falls with a teaspoon. This may explain why so many adults "rediscover" the literature of childhood, and why, to this day, we continue to find ways of reiterating our fundamental hope that wrongs will be righted, and inequalities equalized.

Moreover, this is a hope which is rooted in Scripture itself.

Listen again to the prophet Isaiah, as he imagines the taunts and exultation of the Israelite Exiles in the wake of the defeat of the despotic king of Babylon:

*How you are fallen from heaven, O Day Star, son of Dawn!  
How you are cut down to the ground, you who laid the nations low!*

*The whole earth is at rest and quiet;  
they break forth into singing.  
The cypresses exult over you,  
the cedars of Lebanon saying,  
"Since you were laid low, no one comes to cut us down."*

*Your pomp is brought down to Sheol, and the sound of your harps;  
maggots are the bed beneath you, and worms your covering.*

Now, to be sure, there is something quite graceless and frankly unattractive in the gloating of the Israelites – in their savouring of this delicious reversal of fortunes. As my mother used to say, The only thing worse than a poor loser is a poor winner. But then, my mother was usually talking about Scrabble, or badminton, and not a generation's incarceration under the thumb of a tyrant in an alien land. We may not condone the taunts of the Israelites, but surely we understand them.

There is a very great deal of Scripture, and especially of the prophets, which can be construed as *warning*. I suppose the same could be said for the preaching of the Church (perhaps less in our own day, than in the preaching of "fire and brimstone"). Such texts and sermons address themselves to those in this world who

enjoy (and tend to abuse) power, wealth, reputation, or might. And we must never be too quick to suppose that the persons in question are other than ourselves. (I heard a statistic recently, that something like 75% of people who make more than \$100,000 per year do *not* consider themselves "rich". Really?)

This said, Scripture addresses itself even more forcibly to the little people – to a small nation, who against all odds, are God's Chosen People. Jesus, remember, preached to and was acclaimed by *peasants*, the working poor of Galilee. They would have heard stories of the rich and powerful being overturned as parables not of warning, but of *promise*. Sings Mary Magdalene, "God has cast down the mighty from their thrones, and has lifted up the lowly. He has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty."

David outsmarts Goliath. Jesus takes up little children into his arms and declares them, and not the righteous Pharisees, to be blessed. The poor beggar Lazarus is admitted to the heavenly banquet, and Dives, the rich landowner, suffers the eternal torments of hunger and fire. Jesus says, Here is how it is, people: the first shall be last, and the last shall be first. (Have you ever given any thought to why organize processions of choir and clergy the way we do: always the one in prettiest outfit – that is, the leader, the priest of the parish – is made to come in last, as a constant reminder of the vulnerability of those who would be "first" in community of faith.)

This great reversal is at the heart of the Judaeo-Christian story, faith, and way of life: we have been taught over centuries and now, millennia, to hope for the very thing which our art, our drama, our fairy tales and our literature have named as belonging to the longing of the human soul. In other words, we're on to something here which resonates absolutely with people regardless of their religious inclinations or affiliation. And our calling, most especially as those who are exceedingly blessed, is to join with God, to join in the work of Jesus, to ensure that the *anawim* – be they children, homeless, poor, unlettered, dispossessed, or merely disliked – are heard, consulted, included, empowered. In short, our calling is to eliminate the need for prophetic warning and prophetic promise. For in that day, all shall be one, even as Christ and the Father are one.