

Wings to fly - the eagle

Yesterday I suggested that texts about the wings of the hen occur in the period when Israel was settled in her land and looked to God for ongoing provision and protection of that inheritance. By contrast the wings of the eagle are associated with the more disturbing periods of Exodus and Exile. You might almost say the wings of the hen are for the home matches, while the wings of the eagle are about playing away. Firstly they are ...

Wings to Carry

God's work for his people is likened to an eagle in relation to the events of the Exodus.

Ex 19:4 You have seen what I did to the Egyptians, and how I bore you on eagles' wings and brought you to myself.

The image is of God's wings carrying the people of God out of Egypt. It speaks of both rescuing them and creating proximity between them. Just as you cannot be under the shadow of the hen's protective wings from afar, neither will the eagle's saving wings bear you unless you climb aboard. For those of you who like bizarre contemporary parallels, consider the 3rd Harry Potter book, *The Prisoner of Azkaban* and the relationship between Harry and the flying Hippogriff Buckbeak and the salvific themes surrounding that relationship, including the rescue of Sirius Black. For those who don't know what I am talking about, I pass on.

The saving/carrying motif is continued in Deut 1:31 but this time in human and intimate terms. **in the wilderness, you have seen how the LORD your God carried you, as a man bears his son, in all the way that you went until you came to this place.'**

In either image what is inherent is that God does for us what we cannot do for ourselves; he delivers us from powers that we were powerless against, and bears us to places we could not otherwise reach. He acts in grace and creates real changes of status and destination. All this is qualitatively different from the banality of some congregational life where Sunday attendance and the parish fete are the summit of Christian experience. Though Anglicans can cope with God as the hen, God as the eagle is not their first thought, and may have never been their experience. I read you a quote from the 1945 Church of England report *Towards the Conversion of England*

We cannot expect to get far with evangelism until facts are faced. Firstly the vast majority of English people need to be converted to Christianity. Secondly a large number of Church people also require to be converted – in the sense of their possessing that personal knowledge of Christ which can be ours only by the dedication of the whole self, whatever the cost. ... it will thus be realised that the really daunting feature of modern evangelism is not the masses of the population to be converted, but that most of the worshipping community are only half converted.

Strong words – but the eagle motif and what the eagle alone does, raises such questions.

The image of wings also appears in the exilic texts and so I explore a few headlines of the

Similarities and differences: Exodus and Exile

Both have the following similarities:

1. They are characterised by the surprising, powerful intervention of God in acts of grace.
2. The people of God are living away from home and are powerless victims.
3. The purpose of the rescue is not just for their benefit. It includes fulfilling the Abrahamic covenant of Gen 12 to be a blessing to all. In Isaiah we find this in chapter 42:6-7.

The principal differences are these.

1. In exile the people, as a nation, have brought this upon themselves.
2. It is understood as the outworking of the judgement of God; Jeremiah exemplifies this.
3. There is a need for repentance, seen throughout Hosea and in Daniel 9.
4. Yet nevertheless there is hope – with Isaiah as the most obvious writer.

Steven Croft wrote on exile, in a private paper.

‘This image of what it means to be the church has always been present in Christian thinking but over the last twenty years or so has come more into the mainstream. It gives us words to describe what it feels like to be a Christian in a culture:

- which is changing rapidly;
- in which we are called to work out how to live differently from those around us yet be part of our communities;
- in which we seek the good and well being of our society but also sense that we are aliens and strangers longing for a different home.’

I agree with all he includes but note he has omitted the notes of judgement and repentance, that seem to me also inherent in the Exilic motif.

A number of these strands and those from yesterday are echoed in Deut 32:10-14, which contains in 32:10 the phrase about our value, ‘as the apple of his eye’. Deut 32:11 develops the role of the eagle; **‘like an eagle that stirs up its nest, and hovers over its young, that spreads its wings to catch them and carries them on its pinions.’** Protection and provision now turns to disturbance; the young eagles are encouraged out of the nest so that they learn to fly, though they are supported and will be caught when they fall. I think here of Peter and his short walking on water experience.

Yet Deut 32:15 onwards laments that Israel later abandoned God in the lure of economic prosperity and military might, provoking his judgement. Latterly the role and place of the church in post 1989 Poland and tiger economy Ireland is salutary and could be linked more widely to how the church behaved in the high noon of Christendom.

In asking what wings we most need today we make choices. Do we identify with the settled environment of the Kings period, in which the God of Exodus remains a deliverer – but ceases to move us elsewhere? Do you think we are being moved out a settled period called Christendom and rediscovering mission as movement, change and journey? Is it becoming less plausible to think that God will simply deliver us, in order to restore and leave us where we are?

So I turn to examine

Wings to fly

This is markedly different from ‘wings to protect’, and even from ‘wings to carry’. Isaiah 40:27-31 speaks of transformation and enabling, brought by the Creator/Saviour, and offers hope. In this case the wings become ours, but we soar, not like swallows and sparrows, nesting in the Jerusalem temple, but on eagles’ wings to travel. The language is of movement: running and walking, without stumbling or getting weary.

I assume Isaiah 40-55 is an exilic text. Its reference to Cyrus in Chapter 45 and that it treats the fall of Jerusalem as a past event is evidence enough. Goldingay suggests reading these chapters is more like a encountering a symphony than following a piece of reasoned rhetoric.¹ It has

¹ J. Goldingay, ICC Isaiah 40-55 Volume 1, (T&T Clark, 2006) p.19 para 2.

themes and tunes, but is not one coherent argument. Within this Isaiah 40:12-31 has one tune. Yahweh has Israel's destiny in hand. He is also clear that Jacob/Israel is a 'symbol of God's people as a whole'.²

Exegesis of 40:27ff

The preceding verses 40:21-26 give grounds for hope. God is the creator who brings new resources of energy and perseverance. Yet in 40:27 we meet, in the style and content of the complaint, expression of classic temptations that exile brings.

40:27 'Why do you say O Jacob and complain O Israel ...' Goldingay points out this is not classic lament, because it is not addressed to God. 'Rather they talk *about* Yahweh. It is a devastating sign of how deep their depression has gone.'³ Despair is an exilic condition. It is compounded when we talk only to ourselves or others, but not to God. For then the temptation to complaining self-preoccupation stalks us too. Attending some clergy chapters I wonder where hope has gone and how clergy morale is doing.

These exilic feelings are nuanced as 40:27 continues: 'my way is hidden from the Lord'. The 'way' means the path I have to walk; in other words there is no choice. 'Hidden' is more accurately translated 'eludes'. It is not just that God doesn't see, but he has lost the plot; it is beyond him. This feeling increases the sense of being abandoned and after years of exile, it seems like more than just punishment, and more about being ignored.

Guilt is a tricky exilic reaction. It is appropriate and appears in Isaiah 43:25-28. Goldingay comments that blindness and deafness are icons of rebellion.⁴ When it tips into despair, guilt closes the door behind her and turns the key. That is remorse, not repentance and is dangerous. Of course it colludes with the thought; 'God has given up on us.' In addition to despair are fear and resignation. It is no accident that the message 'do not fear' comes frequently: 40:9, 41:10 & 14, 43:1 & 5. Giving up is an exilic reaction. I hear of the number of newly retiring clergy who say they do not want to be in a congregation ever again and they have become non attenders.

What hope is there in exile?

Have you not known? Known what?

40:28 is better translated 'Yahweh is the 'lasting' God.' That is, he has staying power. I find that a sharper term than 'everlasting' which we mainly think of as outside time, a remote quality. He is also creator of the ends of the earth. There is nowhere he is not effective – even your south west Wales, or my industrial Yorkshire.

40:29 He gives strength to 'the weary'. It means those who have been giving out and using up energy, whereas 'faint' means those lacking the opportunity to take in resources, having given out. I find weary and faint characteristic clergy words; there is more to do now than before, higher expectations than in the past and yet it seems with less resources and less chance to be renewed. But 40:29 asserts 'God increases the power of the weak'. Weak is a forceful word meaning resourceless; literally 'one to whom there are no resources'.

Faced with being weary, faint, weak, being young won't be enough to meet this challenge, skilled human resources will not meet the case. The young men of 40:30 are actually picked military men, the chosen, the elite.

² J. D. Goldingay, NIBC Isaiah, (Paternoster, 2001) p. 228.

³ Goldingay, Isaiah, p. 228.

⁴ Goldingay, ICC, p. 3, para 3.

But, those 40:31 who wait for the Lord will renew their strength. The word 'wait' comes 47 times in the Old Testament. Diagnostically it occurs 15 times in Isaiah and 17 times in the Psalms of lament. It means confident, well grounded expectation and trust. Etymologically 'wait' is related to the idea of 'a stretched cord'; it works because it is in tension, not relaxed. Exilic life has tensions. One is the pull towards assimilation to the surrounding culture and in our day I judge the dominant one is materialist consumerism that is alive and well in the church. Take Brueggemann: 'In our own time, it is not very difficult to identify as Babylon the global system of consumer capitalism that seems to sweep all before it.'⁵ The other pull is to retreat into the ghetto and not to seek the welfare of the culture in which we find ourselves. Waiting for God is not easy, yet even to see the need for it will be to be half way there. The context of the wait word suggests a mix of lamenting, waiting, and hoping. Yet we must not turn this into a formula, make it into a magic penny in the slot of a prayer machine and try to force God's hand.

What is the consequence of waiting?

It changes us. 40:31 suggests it is not so much that we are lifted up on wings, but rather we grow wings like eagles. Goldingay: 'Through waiting for Yahweh then, people gain the capacity to soar like eagles.'⁶

He notes that the verbs translated in 40:31 as fly, run, walk are odd because they make a regression of fast, then moderate and then slow. He argues 'walk' probably means to travel and it qualifies the words 'fly' and 'run', pointing out that this 'does not signify aimless movement'. These are people who are 'on the move to some goal'. Brueggemann comments; '*Either* folk will be faint, weak, exhausted ... *or* those who hope and wait and expect Yahweh and will have strength to fly, to run, to walk ... Yahweh is the single variable ... There is no third alternative.'⁷

Here then, with wings to fly, is a vision that transcends the present. I end with two comments from Brueggemann: 'The practise of such poetic imagination is the most subversive, redemptive act that a leader of a faith community can undertake in the midst of exiles'⁸ Yet '(T)he struggle for women and men of faith, now as always, is to imagine our life out beyond the system ... It must have seemed outrageous then, as it does now.'⁹

Group work

Do you think our situation, in the western church, resonates most with the Exodus, or the periods of the Kings, or the Exile?

What may we have to repent of as a church?

What does it mean in practice to wait [confident, well grounded expectation and trust]?

If flying implies movement, where do you hope to fly to?

⁵ W. Brueggeman, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 28.

⁶ Goldingay, *ICC Isaiah*, p 130.

⁷ Brueggeman, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 27.

⁸ W. Brueggemann, *The Prophetic Imagination*, p. 96.

⁹ Brueggeman, *Isaiah 40-66*, p. 28.