

# The Prince of Peace: prophecy for our times

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Sometime in October last year, President Reagan gave the following little homily on the scriptures to a Jewish acquaintance: "You know, I turn back to your ancient prophets in the Old Testament and the signs foretelling Armageddon, and I find myself wondering if—if we're the generation that is going to see that come about. I don't know if you've noted any of these prophecies lately, but, believe me, they certainly describe the times we're going through." You know, I think he's right—that is, apart from confusing the Book of Revelation with the Hebrew prophets.

"The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who dwelt in a land of deep darkness, on them has light shined... For every boot of the tramping warrior in battle tumult and every garment rolled in blood will be burned as fuel for the fire. For unto us a child is born, unto us a son is given; and the government will be upon his shoulder and his name will be called, 'Wonderful, Counsellor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace'. Of the increase of his government and of peace there will be no end, upon the throne of David, and over his kingdom, to establish it, and to uphold it with justice and with righteousness from this time forth and for evermore."  
(Isaiah 9. 2—7).

Until recently these words did nothing more for me than bring back nostalgic memories of Handel's Messiah from my childhood. But now they mean a great deal more. Looking back to the original story, I find that they promise the birth of a Prince of Peace for the small state of Judah, 700 years or so before Christ. They promise a king who would be *just*—enough to bring justice to the poor and the weak; and *powerful*—enough to give security against all the aggressive, militaristic states threatening Judah. As Christians, we believe that this prophecy was fulfilled in quite a different sense from the one expected, and much later, and not for Judah only, but for the whole human race. But in what sense? I do not think we will begin to understand this if we do not take

some trouble, and go back and find out what the issue was for Isaiah and the Kingdom of Judah. If only President Reagan would turn back seriously to our ancient prophets, he might find something unexpected and a lot more helpful to the human race than dangerous speculations about Armageddon. It is the correspondences between Judah's story and our story which interest me.

Judah was all that was left of David's Kingdom which, about 250 years previously, had stretched from Syria to the borders of Egypt. But in Isaiah's time it was just a small city-state in the hills, trying to keep its independence. Its city was David's city, Jerusalem. Time was running out for small city-states in that part of the world. They were about to be swallowed up by the big empires: first, the Assyrians, then the Babylonians, then the Persians, then the Greeks and finally, in Jesus's time, the Romans. It was the beginning of the people we know as the Jews, the people of Judah. The people survive in every part of the world, but their original state survived for only about 100 years after Isaiah, and was then smashed by the Babylonians. It never recovered its independence, except for a brief spell in the second century before Christ—and then again in 1948. The other part of David's kingdom, the northern state of Israel, disappeared much more quickly from world history, never to be restored. It was broken by the Assyrians while Isaiah was alive, leaving only the remnant of the Samaritans.

Isaiah delivered his prophecies at a time when the little states of Palestine were panic-stricken by Assyria: an aggressive, militaristic state centred in what is now Upper Iraq. It was a dark cloud on the horizon, swallowing up even the big cities like Babylon, killing and transporting their people, occupying their land. It was the first real imperialist world power. The little states tried to survive by making alliances among themselves, or with the once-great power of Egypt. Egyptian chariots and horses were in especially high demand as defence forces. They were the most prestigious weapon systems of the day, rather like Trident missile submarines now. They were powerful and attractive to the ruling classes, but very expensive and not very suitable to a small rocky country with a lot of hills.

In the year 735, soon after the beginning of Isaiah's activity as a prophet, the two small kingdoms of Syria and Israel joined to attack Judah. They wanted to force Judah into an anti-Assyrian alliance. Ahaz, the king of Judah, was frightened and sent a big present to the Assyrian king and asked him for help, which he was only too willing to give. The Assyrians marched in and destroyed Syria and Israel as independent nations. They transported many of their people and replaced them with people from other conquered states. This gave a breathing space to Judah, but it was only a short-term military solution—such as will always tempt politicians. Now the Assyrians were on their doorstep. Making alliances with the great powers has always been a risky business.

Isaiah had been very much against it and he told Ahaz so when they met at the conduit on the road to the Fuller's Field, outside the walls of Jerusalem. Ahaz was inspecting the water supply in case of a siege. Isaiah counselled quietness—a low profile, as we might say. Judah should be like the gentle waters of the Shiloa stream which fed the city, rather than the fierce drowning waters of the Euphrates, where the Assyrians came from. Judah should be still and put its faith in God, who would ensure its survival. As a sign, the Lord would send a child, Immanuel, which means, “God is in the midst of us (giving us security against our enemies)” (Is. 7.14). But Ahaz did not listen and so he let Judah become a client state of Assyria. He had to pay a lot of money and to put up an Assyrian altar in the temple in Jerusalem and he worshipped at it to demonstrate his loyalty. In order to survive, the weak nations think they must worship the gods of the strong nations.

So Isaiah was not just a genius of a religious poet writing the libretto of Handel's Messiah. He was talking politics all the time, talking about *his* world, how his people and their leaders should face up to the military power just over the horizon which threatened the existence of the nation. But he used religious language, because it was a religious matter. He spoke of idolatry, of trust in YHWH the God of the Israelites, of righteousness and lack of it. And he spoke of peace, *shalom*. He spoke of God's anger, which would bring war, and of God's salvation, which would bring peace without end. Peace is ultimately a religious notion, like justice and security. We cannot afford to speak of these things as if they were purely secular realities. The final answers in international relations are religious ones: they have to do with living together with all the women and men whom God has created. They have to do with God's order in this world. Thus, when Jesus commanded us to love our enemies, he was not talking about enemies we will have in the next world—an absurdity. He was talking about the enemies of our nation and even our religion, in this world.

But to return to Isaiah. His word was not listened to. Ahaz put his trust in idols, in armaments and alliances, but not in the Lord God. Isaiah said that Jerusalem would be destroyed because of its idols. The point was that the Assyrians were the breakers of idols: when they conquered a state they broke its idols. It was the sign of the destruction of its power. No idols were safe from the overwhelming military destruction. It meant the triumph of the conqueror's gods. So when Jerusalem put its trust in idols instead of the living God, then it could be destroyed by military power like all the other cities. Isaiah puts these words into the mouth of Assyria: “As my hand has reached to the kingdoms of the idols whose graven images were greater than those of Jerusalem and Samaria, shall I not do to Jerusalem and her idols as I have done to Samaria and her images?” (10. 10—11, cf. 37. 18). The idols are the images of the power on which the State depends. It puts its

ultimate trust in its idols. Everything is sacrificed to them, including, if necessary, the people. All moral considerations are subordinated to them. It is, after all, a matter of the security of the State.

It does not take much effort to see that we live in a state of idolatry in this country at present. Nuclear weapons are the primary symbols of State power, the mark of Britain's status as a power in the world. This is the way they have been conceived by successive British Governments. Looked at through religious eyes, nuclear deterrence sets up the State in the place of God, claiming that we should be prepared to commit any degree of violence in its service. It makes us ready to sacrifice all moral considerations to a nuclear retaliation against the people of another nation. Moreover, we have a Civil Defence which will allow the people to be destroyed while the forces of Government are maintained. The only question for the statesmen seems to be, "Whose idols are the most powerful and numerous? When the evil day comes, whose will prevail?"

Isaiah wrote down what he had said as a witness to the future, gave it to his disciples and withdrew from public life for the rest of Ahaz's reign. Judah remained a client state until Ahaz's son, Hezekiah, succeeded him. He was a king more faithful to the God of his fathers and mothers. The Book of Kings says, "he did what was right in the eyes of the Lord"—mostly by removing the idols from Jerusalem. But he was soon invited by the Egyptians to join an alliance against Assyria in return for chariots and horses. Once again Isaiah appeared and urged non-involvement: "For thus said the Lord God, the Holy One of Israel, 'In returning and rest you shall be saved; in quietness and trust shall be your strength'. And you would not, but you said, 'No! We will speed upon horses...'" (30.15) He said that God was in control of events, not Assyria, which was merely an instrument of God's wrath: "Assyria, the rod of my anger, the staff of my fury..." (10.5) He said the rulers of Jerusalem had made a "covenant with death", based upon lies: "Because you have said, We have made a covenant with death, and with Sheol we have an agreement; when the overwhelming scourge passes through it will not come to us; for we have made lies our refuge and in falsehood we have taken shelter". (28.15) It was a bargain with death, as if to say, "We'll make sacrifices, we'll pretend you're not there if you'll pass us by". They deceived themselves about the security which they expected from the alliance with the super-power, Egypt, and about the power which would come from their chariots and horses. Like ruling classes everywhere, they equated security with armaments, and the balance of power. It was basically a lie about their real condition, their real vulnerability. Did real security come through having the latest weapons and super-power alliances? Or did it come through trust in the Lord? Isaiah said the latter: "The Egyptians are men, not God; and their horses are flesh, and not spirit. When the Lord stretches out his hand, the helper will stumble, and he who is helped will fall, and they will all perish

together.” (31.3). But the king and his nobles said the former. They wanted the chariots and horses. It must have felt good to ride on a chariot behind three horses. What power could a nation claim without them? They agreed to be Egypt’s forward-based defence.

But Egypt was nearly finished as a world power: it was a broken reed which pierces the hand of the man who leans on it, as the Assyrian commander said, when he reached the walls of Jerusalem. The Assyrians had a way of dealing with disloyalty. Under Sennacherib they steam-rolled through the coastal plain of Palestine as far as Egypt, crushing the cities on the way. They sent a task force into the hills, up to Jerusalem. They burned the land, destroyed the villages and slaughtered the people. The remains of many killed in that “mission” have been found in mass graves by archeologists. They shut up Hezekiah in Jerusalem “like a bird in a cage”, as Sennacherib says in one of his inscriptions.

But Isaiah, shut up with the others, prophesied that the city would not be taken and he counselled Hezekiah to hold out, which he did. Jerusalem survived for about 100 years, largely because the Assyrians had to go home and deal with the Babylonians, who eventually overthrew them. It was Babylon which eventually destroyed Jerusalem and sent its people into exile.

That, in a brief sketch, is the political story behind the words of Isaiah, the prophecy of the Prince of Peace, the child who is to be born to us, the one who will bring real and lasting peace. It is a story of super-power alliances, of desperate strategies for survival, of anxiety to get the best armaments money can buy, of self-deception and lies about where true security is to be found. And it is about the worship of idols, the symbols of state power, rather than of the true God. So where the men of Judah saw a crisis of *arms*, Isaiah saw a crisis of *faith*. God had indeed promised that the house of David would stand for ever. But this was widely interpreted as meaning that the King of Jerusalem would win all his battles. All it had to do was join itself to the strong. Isaiah interpreted it differently: in his mind God was its true security. The men of Jerusalem did not understand this because they feared the wrong things: “For the Lord spoke thus to me with his strong arm upon me, and warned me not to walk in the way of this people, saying, ‘Do not call conspiracy all that this people call conspiracy, and do not fear what they fear, nor be in dread. But the Lord of hosts, *him* you shall regard as holy; let *him* be your dread.’” (8.12) They stood in awe of military might, when they should have stood in awe of God and his demands. They knew about weapons and alliances but they did not know the living God. It was for this reason, the prophets said, that the nation was doomed to destruction: “The ox knows its owner and the ass its master’s crib; but Israel does not know me...” (1.13)

What would this knowledge of God have been? How would it have

brought the security that weapons and alliances did not bring? They *thought* they knew God when they went to the temple to worship. They *thought* they knew what they were doing when they made sacrifices and kept the appointed feasts and made a lot of prayers. But God rejected all this as mere outward show: “When you spread forth your hands, I will hide my eyes from you; even though you make many prayers, I will not listen;” Why is this? “...your hands are full of blood. Wash yourselves, make yourselves clean; remove the evil of your doings from before your eyes; cease to do evil, learn to do good; seek justice, correct oppression; defend the fatherless, plead for the widow.” (1.17) So it is this which is true knowledge and worship of God. All the great prophets say it, including Micah, Isaiah’s contemporary: “‘With what shall I come before the Lord, and bow myself before God on high?...Shall I give my firstborn for my transgression, the fruit of my body for the sin of my soul?...’ He has showed you, O man, what is good; and what does the Lord require of you but to do justice, and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God?” (Mic. 6.7f) Jesus insisted on the same priorities when he recalled the words of another contemporary of Isaiah, the prophet Hosea: “Go and learn what this means, ‘I desire mercy, and not sacrifice, (the knowledge of God, rather than holocausts)’” (Matt, 9.13 and Hos. 6.6).

So the real knowledge and worship of God is first to pay attention to justice, to attend to the cause of the weak and the needy of the community. This would bring security to the community because it would put an end to the destruction which is going on within it. The security of the State can only come about—if at all—through first paying attention to justice within the society which the State is supposed to serve. Instead society is made to serve the State and men and women are sacrificed to it. Micah uses the terrible image of a butcher: “Hear, you rulers of the House of Israel. Is it not for you to know justice? you who hate the good and love evil, who tear the skin from off my people, and their flesh from off their bones; who eat the flesh of my people, and flay their skin from off them, and break their bones in pieces, and chop them up like meat in a kettle, like flesh in a cauldron.” (3.1—3). This was the real cause of the nation’s weakness and its inability to stand up to its enemies: the destruction of the people first through injustice and poverty and then through the depredations of war. The prophets say that the unjust society is indefensible, however many weapons the State deploys. It will collapse from its own internal strife and weakness: “Because you...trust in oppression and perverseness, and rely on them; therefore this iniquity shall be to you like a break in a high wall, bulging out, and about to collapse, whose crash comes suddenly in an instant...” (Isaiah 30.13) Thus State security is a religious matter: idolatrous religion is militarism and internal oppression, whereas worship of the true God is first paying attention to the claims of the needy. That alone gives real strength against enemies. That

alone gives true peace. If our nation is weak and difficult to defend, it is not because of a lack of the most powerful weapons. It is because of what is already being done to people. It is because they are already being sacrificed to the idols of the State.

When I was in Manchester in February this year I was told two things which illustrate the present situation. First of all someone told me that Oxfam—usually associated with droughts in Africa—has started a project to combat malnutrition in the Greater Manchester area. Then a young physics student from the University told me about the very large proportion of physics graduates who have to find jobs in the defence industries, especially electronics. If you don't take the job offered by the man from Marconi or Plessey or Ferranti when he comes round you might find yourself on the dole after graduation. If you do take the job you might find yourself working for years on one small component of a weapons system—a diffraction grating, say—without knowing anything more about the system itself. It is not for you to know. All they need is your expertise on one thing. It is a good example of the divorce between means and ends in modern military technology. It is also a terrible misdirection of human lives and skill. But it is part of a much larger process of misdirection of resources which has megaton weapons at one end and death by malnutrition at the other. And it is a prelude to the infinitely more terrible waste of human life which will result from a nuclear war. The easy acceptance of the one prepares us to accept the other. But we accept it because we think we are warding off disaster. It is a “covenant with death”, which phrase strikes me as a perfect way of describing nuclear deterrence. It is a short-term bargain we make with death. We bend all our resources towards the achievement of total destruction, in order to avoid total destruction. It presupposes that means can be divorced from ends for as long as we choose. It is the great lie. “We have made lies our refuge and in falsehood we have taken shelter”.

The lie is all pervading. It runs from the deceitful information given by the British Home Office about the likely casualties from a nuclear attack on Britain (exposed by a report issued by the British Medical Association) to the standard lie about the meaning of “defence”. Three years ago the Home Office said we might expect about 200 megatons of nuclear weapons of various sizes to be directed against about 80 targets. This is about 15,000 times the yield of the bomb dropped on Hiroshima which eventually killed about 200,000 people. The BMA report on the Medical Effects of Nuclear War found that the number of casualties would be more than twice that estimated by the Home Office and that it would totally overwhelm available medical facilities. And the longer-term effects would make complete nonsense of the Government's advice on shelters. But our willingness to retaliate with the same sort of destruction on the Soviet people is called “defence” and it is suggested by the Government that it demonstrates our “resolve”. The implication is that, just as the heroic British people stood up to the Nazis in the last war, so they would—with nuclear weapons—unflinchingly defend themselves against

the Soviet Union in the next.

The truth is that heroic defence—of the kind which both the British and the Russians showed in the last war—is no longer possible to a nuclear power. What would be suffered by the British people shows just how far it is from real defence. And what it would do to the Russian people shows how very far it is from being heroic. All that is left is the mass murder of hostages by retaliatory strike and abandonment of the people to a nation-wide charnel-house that goes by the name of Civil Defence. It seems to me that a national community which accepts such a policy is already near to losing its collective soul. And I mean this in the strong sense in which Jesus spoke to his own nation—that losing their souls they were fit only for the perpetually-burning rubbish tip of Gehenna, outside the walls of the city.

What answer did Isaiah have to the lie? He foretold the destruction which would come from idolatry and self-seeking alliances between the nobles and great powers. But he also foretold the coming of a king, sent by God to rule over the people with justice and in peace: to protect the cause of the weak against the strong and ruthless and to be a real security against enemies. He foretold the Prince of Peace. Perhaps he had Hezekiah in mind at the time. But that ideal king did not come in his time. Christians, 700 years after Isaiah, identified the Prince of Peace with Jesus of Nazareth. The New Testament—especially the gospels of Luke and John—is full of references to the peace of God's rule established by Christ. But if he did bring peace it was such that his own people did not understand it. As Jesus drew near to Jerusalem on his last journey, he wept over it, saying "Would that even now you knew the things that make for peace" (Luke 19.44). Even at that late hour there was still time for the nation to turn to God. But it did not, and it was destroyed again not long after Jesus's death.

So what difference does he make? How can we say that Jesus Christ is the Prince of Peace when everything is much the same as it always was—only worse? I believe there is a difference only if we, who say that we are followers of Christ, witness to it. Witness is something very special and deliberate. It is not quite the same as political protest. It is first and foremost a *religious* activity. But it is a religious activity which may nevertheless have political consequences, especially for the people who undertake it. What makes it political is the same thing that makes it religious—the witness to the worship of the true, living God rather than of idols. Christians do not have to turn away from a wicked world of politics to religion. The wickedness already has a religious character. It is worship of the wrong gods. But we cannot witness to the worship of the true God simply by going to church and keeping the feasts and ignoring what is happening at nuclear bases like those in England at Upper Heyford and Greenham Common. That would be to repeat the error of Isaiah's contemporaries. If we do not witness in some way against the



things that are being done in those places it can only be said that they are being done with our agreement and on our behalf.

Christians, then, are able to witness to a different order of things. It is the order we call the Kingdom of God. So it uses symbols of a different kind of life: the symbols surrounding baptism, the Lord's Supper and the feasts of the Church's year. It is the possession of these ancient symbols which make Christians particularly resourceful when it comes to acting at nuclear bases. We have a set of symbolic actions which already spell out the defeat of the ancient evil which is now embodied supremely in nuclear weapons. So a judicious use of these symbols is not—as some people have said—subordinating religion to political purposes. It is, on the contrary, asserting true religion against the idols and the lies of a false religion. Christians do have power which they can exercise. It is the power of the gospel of the Prince of Peace. It is expressed through liturgical symbols and through the Christian moral tradition on war and peace, developed through the centuries. We may not in detail know how destruction is to be avoided, any more than Isaiah did in his time. But we can, with the authority invested in those symbols and that tradition, witness against the preparations for destruction. So far it seems to have been the policy of Britain's Ministry of Defence to avoid when possible prosecuting Christian ministers arrested for civil disobedience relating to nuclear weapons. Could it be that it is embarrassing to have these articulate people standing up in court, in front of the press or even a jury, demonstrating just how the country's defence policy contradicts fundamental Christian values and respect for the moral law?

But ultimately our hope is not in the effectiveness of our witness nor in the power of our arguments but in the rule of Christ, the Prince of Peace, under whose judgment we stand along with everyone else.