

Isa 40:21-31  
Mark 1: 29-39

Isaiah 40:25 “To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.”

“To whom then will you compare me?” – This is a profound question, when it is the Holy One who asks it.

The English word *compare* comes from the Latin, meaning “to make or esteem equal”.

In Isa 40:25 the Hebrew word translated *compare* means literally “to make like”.

You can only compare something which is similar, or at least has some superficial similarity, otherwise you would be making a contrast between things which are dissimilar.

It is not always easy compare things, particularly those which are very complex.

For example, when you have an insurance policy which is due for renewal, and your insurance company has quoted a price which seems much too high, you might want to look around to see if you can get a better deal.

If your only concern is the amount you need to pay, then it probably will be quite easy to find another company quoting a better price.

But insurance policies are fiendishly complicated documents, and it can be very difficult to compare like with like.

Moreover, some companies have a better reputation than others for dealing with customers and settling claims, and you may wish to take this into account when making a choice.

Likewise, if you are thinking of changing your energy supplier, it is by no means a straightforward matter to compare the many different tariffs on offer.

Of course, nowadays you can make use of price-comparison websites to make such comparisons much easier, but they are only of limited use.

Whenever I use these websites, I am always left wondering whether the policies or contracts which come out on top are those likely to make the most in commission for the website, and whether perhaps the best deal of all lies out there somewhere in a location not listed on the website.

But if in our modern world we sometimes have to make complex comparisons, the prophet behind Isaiah 40 had no such problem.

He challenges the recipients of his message to make a comparison which is simple and straightforward, and yet at the same time also impossible.

“To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him? says the Holy One.”

This question was addressed to Judaeans exiles in Babylon.

After they had got over the initial trauma of being uprooted from their homeland and planted in a foreign land, they and their next generation would surely have been impressed by some of the things which surrounded them.

There they were at the centre of one of the foremost civilisations of the ancient world, with all its impressive architecture, art and learning.

If the writings of the prophet behind Isa 40-55 are anything to go by, we can surmise that the Judaeans were particularly impressed by the trappings of Babylonian religion.

This prophet several times refers to the skilled work of the craftsmen who made idols from wood and metal.

The exiles could look around them and see beautifully crafted images of Babylonian gods placed in their impressive shrines.

What did the exiles have in place of these?

An invisible God, who prohibited the making of images of himself, and who insisted that the centre of his worship was at the temple in Jerusalem which was (even as the crow flies) some 500 miles away, and which lay in ruins.

Some of the exiles, who supposed that their long-term future lay in their new surroundings, might well have wanted to assimilate, and might have been tempted to adopt the worship of Babylonian gods as a part of this process.

Thus the prophet more than once engages in a polemic against the worship of idols.

These are only wood or metal objects made by humans.

The craftsman might well take wood from the same tree and use some of it to make an idol and some of it to burn as fuel to warm himself or for cooking.

These idols can do nothing, and if they need to be moved, they have to be carried on beasts.

The God of Israel cannot be possibly compared with these idols or the gods which they represent.

“ ‘To whom then will you compare me, that I should be like him?’ says the Holy One”.

It is the Holy One who poses this question, and as such he is utterly incomparable.

It is he who created all things, and it is he who is in control of the events of history.

In the words of our prophet: “It is he who sits above the circle of the earth, and its inhabitants are like grasshoppers; who stretches out the heavens like a curtain, and spreads them like a tent to dwell in; who brings princes to nought, and makes the rulers of the earth as nothing ... Have you not known? Have you not heard? The LORD is the everlasting God, the Creator of the ends of the earth. He does not faint or grow weary, his understanding is unsearchable.” (40:22-23, 28).

This God, who is in control of the events of history, is working towards the fulfilment of a purpose, and as a part of his fulfilment of that purpose, he is about to act to bring his people back home from their exile in Babylon.

When we move forward in time by about 550 years, we see the beginning of an entirely new phase in the fulfilment of God's purpose.

Our Gospel reading has its setting right at the beginning of the ministry of Jesus in Galilee.

In the immediately preceding passage (Mark 1:21-28), Jesus was in Capernaum, teaching in the synagogue on the Sabbath day, and Mark tells us that they were amazed at his teaching, because he taught not like one of their scribes, but as one who had authority.

His authority is seen when a man, described as having an unclean spirit, cries out, “What have you to do with us, Jesus of Nazareth? Have you come to destroy us? I know who you are, the Holy One of God.”

At this Jesus rebukes the unclean spirit and it comes out of him, and in amazement, those present exclaim, “What is this? A new teaching! With authority he commands even the unclean spirits, and they obey him.”

It is at this point that our Gospel lesson begins.

Jesus leaves the synagogue, and enters the house of Simon and Andrew.

Simon's mother-in-law lies sick with a fever, and Jesus heals her.

We are then told: "That evening, at sundown, they brought to him all who were sick or possessed with demons. And the whole city was gathered together about the door. And he healed many who were sick with various diseases, and cast out many demons; and he would not permit the demons to speak, because they knew him." (Mark 1:32-34).

Here St Mark presents us with a glimpse of the dawning of God's kingdom in the ministry of Jesus.

The unclean spirit possessing the man in the synagogue recognises him as Jesus of Nazareth, and declares him to be "the Holy One of God".

We may recall that St Mark has opened his Gospel with the words, "The beginning of the gospel of Jesus Christ, the Son of God."

Thus the reader of the Gospel knows right from the first verse who Jesus is, but as he begins his teaching ministry those who listen to him do not yet know this.

It becomes plain only when Jesus performs his first act of healing.

Not only does the spirit possessing the man declare Jesus to be "the Holy One of God", but it shows itself to be subject to his authority, as it comes out of the man at the rebuke of Jesus.

In the thought of the time, illness was caused by the possession of demons.

These demons were under the control of the devil or Satan, who thus held considerable sway in the present world-order.

But as soon as Jesus came onto the scene and started to cast out these demons in his acts of healing, this was the beginning of a new world order.

It was nothing other than dawning of the kingdom of God.

For Jesus's acts of healing were a practical demonstration of the rule of God.

The prophet in Isaiah 40 presents to us a God who is utterly incomparable because of his work in creation and his control of the events of history.

And in chapter 1 of his Gospel, St Mark presents Jesus to us, as God's own Son, demonstrating the supreme power of God by casting out demons, and thus declaring that God's kingdom has arrived.