

Homily for December 7th 2019
Feast of St Ambrose

A passage like the one we heard read from Isaiah can be hard for us to interpret without knowing something about the historical context in which it was written.

Isaiah is writing to the southern kingdom of Judah with its capital at Jerusalem around the year 700 BC. Some 20 years earlier the Northern Kingdom of Israel, with its capital at Samaria, had fallen to the Assyrians, the dominant Middle Eastern Power at that time. Now this same political power is pressing upon Jerusalem and the political and religious leaders in Jerusalem want to establish an alliance with Egypt. There is a climate of fear and insecurity characterizing Judah's citizens resulting in choosing to establish a partnership with the Jewish people's perennial enemy, the Egyptians.

Into this situation Isaiah speaks a word that is repeated throughout his prophetic text. It is this: Salvation and strength are the consequence of firm trust and quiet confidence in God's abiding attention and concern for Zion.¹ The words we heard read today give poetic expression to what it will mean for Judah to trust in God instead of Egypt, or any other foreign power.

In our appointed text there are two themes that stand out. The first is centred on hearing true instruction. The second has to do with the gifts and benefits gained from this instruction. So we read:

*Though the Lord may give you the bread of adversity and the water of affliction, yet your Teacher will not hide himself any more, but your eyes shall see your Teacher. ²¹ And when you turn to the right or when you turn to the left, your ears shall hear a word behind you, saying, "This is the way; walk in it."*²

Rather than living in fear of Assyria the Lord invites Judah to listen to Isaiah their teacher so that in turn their lives can be governed by the Lord's generous care and thereby can be meaningful and fruitful. This is the message captured by the beautiful language of these verses that speak of the fruitful ground, bubbling brooks and light of the moon will be like the light of the sun, and the light of the sun will be sevenfold, like the light of seven days.³

It was at another time of great turmoil, confusion and unrest that God called forth another teacher to call God's people to returning and rest and so put their trust in the Lord. The year was 374 and the city of Milan was in turmoil. For decades the city had been under the influence of Arian Bishops, who denied the full divinity of Jesus Christ. Milan was about to elect a new bishop.

¹ Seitz, C. R. (1993). [*Isaiah 1–39*](#) (p. 219). Louisville, KY: John Knox Press.

² [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Is 30:20–21). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

³ [*The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version, Catholic Edition*](#). (1993). (Is 30:26). Washington, DC: National Council of Churches of Christ.

There were heated arguments and conflict among those responsible for electing Milan's next Bishop.

At the time Ambrose, who was preparing to become a Catholic – he was a catechumen and the governor of Milan, came to preserve the peace. As he spoke those gathered recognized in him such wisdom and sound council that the electors acclaimed him as Bishop, even though he had not yet been baptized. On first being elected Ambrose fled Milan, not believing he could fulfill the responsibility now bestowed upon him. Eventually he consented, was baptized, ordained and the consecrated Milan's Bishop. An Episcopal See he held from 374 until his death in 397.

Through those years he guided Milan as their spiritual leader as Isaiah had done, calling people to follow in the ways of the Lord amidst the decline of the Roman Empire where political confusion and insecurity was on the ascendency.

His most lasting influence was on the young Augustine who was so taken with Ambrose's teaching that with time, he became convinced of the truth of the Christian way and was baptized by Ambrose in 387.

In every age we have the challenge. Will we live fearfully because of what is going on in the world or trustingly in the teachings and ways of the Lord? Men like St. Ambrose and Isaiah remind us to trust in the Lord for as we prayed in today's Collect:

**O God, who made the Bishop Saint Ambrose
a teacher of the Catholic faith
and a model of apostolic courage,
raise up in your Church men after your own heart
to govern her with courage and wisdom.⁴**

⁴ [*The Roman Missal: Renewed by Decree of the Most Holy Second Ecumenical Council of the Vatican, Promulgated by Authority of Pope Paul VI and Revised at the Direction of Pope John Paul II.*](#) (2011). (Third Typical Edition, p. 1009). Washington D.C.: United States Conference of Catholic Bishops.