

In the parable of the Good Samaritan (Lk. 10,30-37) the priest and the Levite famously pass by “on the other side”. The Samaritan, though a member of a race that despised the Jews as they were despised by them, was moved in his bowels (Gk: *splanchna*), the seat of emotions (as we might say, it was 'gut-wrenching') and he approached the injured, half-dead man, cleaned and bandaged his wounds and took him to the inn. This is one of the great illustrations of compassion, fellow feeling, associating with someone in their pain. 'Compassion' literally means 'to suffer with'. In some way we take on the pain of another when we show compassion.

As the Good Samaritan shows, compassion cannot be done at a distance. It has to be close up and personal.

Through the Old Testament God is revealed as: “kind and full of compassion, slow to anger and rich in mercy”. The most frequent descriptions of God are the Hebrew words '*emet*' and '*hesed*': meaning God's total faithfulness, and abiding loving-kindness.

But God is inevitably at a distance. While Moses can approach God on the mountain, the people must remain at a safe distance, for who can come into the presence of God? God appears in sign, as a bush burning but not consumed; as a pillar of fire by night and cloud in the day. Even in ecstatic vision God as God can not be seen. Isaiah knows he is in the presence of God but winged, fiery serpents, cherubim, hide God from sinful human eyes.

Through the calamity of the exile, following the destruction of Jerusalem and its Temple by the Babylonians, God continued to be near his people. In the ancient world gods were gods of nations and so were geographically confined. When the Syrian army commander Naaman who suffered from some form of skin complaint described as leprosy was cured by the prophet Elisha he wanted to worship the God of Israel and so took cart loads of Israel's soil back home with him so he could pray to the One God on God's own earth. When the Israelites were in Babylon Ezekiel had a vision of God's throne: majestic and glorious - and on wheels. God was mobile and where God's people went God could be with them. Still, Ezekiel saw the throne but not God. God remained both close but at a distance, near and far.

After the exile the people returned to the Land. At least some few returned led by Zerubabel, and later Ezra and Nehemiah, and slowly the Temple was rebuilt and the walls of the city were restored. Isaiah, known as second Isaiah, a member of the school of the eighth century prophet which honoured the master's work down the centuries, wrote the passage we heard today. It envisages God returning to his city, to Zion.

A multi-laned super-highway is to be built by lopping off the mountains and filling in the valleys to ensure a smooth run for the cavalcade from heaven which will sweep

God back to God's city which is David's city. This construction could be achieved by no earthly workers. It can only be an act of God.

This was one of Isaiah's great visions. No doubt the prophet expected it to happen in his time. But it never happened. God remained in heaven; still close to his people but still at a distance. The people treasured the prophecy but awaited its fulfilment.

Notice how many words of Isaiah's prophecy, our first reading, are echoed in Mark's opening to his Gospel: 'Good News', 'messenger', 'sin' - 'atoned for' or 'forgiven', and the quotation from Isaiah, which is actually a compilation from Isaiah and Exodus and Malachi. Mark clearly wants us to have that passage from the prophet in mind, as we listen to his opening. He is describing the fulfilment of what Isaiah announced: God is returning to Zion. "Here is your God". And God's return will bring about reconciliation, the wiping away of sins.

The astonishing, scandalous thing is that when God appears it is not a regal figure of power and might, but a man with no background other than a location that emphasises his insignificance, and whose destiny will be death on a cross. God comes to us no longer as one who keeps their distance but one who gets down among us and dirty; one who shares in our world in its wretchedness and dies the death of the lowliest most miserable of human beings, a model of suffering with and suffering on behalf of; the paradigm of compassion.

Mercy and compassion cannot be given from afar. You have to be close up and share yourself with those to whom you are dispensing mercy and compassion. You have to become one with them, with costly giving or else the aid will be patronising and superficial, given for one's own benefit rather than for the one who receives. And so God comes among us as one like us, sharing our human condition to the fullness, and to the dregs. Such is the compassion of our God, seen in the one who comes.