

A fortiori

Sermon for the ordination of Peter Robinson to the  
priesthood, at St. George's Anglican Church,  
Burlington, Ontario

Isaiah 45:1-3

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*December 2, 2012*

*Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus, whose right hand I have grasped, to subdue nations before him and ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed: <sup>2</sup> "I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron, <sup>3</sup> I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. (Isa 45:1-3 RSV)*

King Cyrus of Persia was an amazing man. Curush... as his name is in Old Persian... created the largest empire that the world had ever seen. It extended from the Mediterranean all the way to India. So vast was his empire that he was given the title: *King of the Four Corners of the World*.

Curush achieved these results with a tremendous ability at military maneuvering, strategy and the strength of his arm. In fact, his very name may mean ‘one who humiliates his enemy’. His name and his description, is picked up in the first verse of our reading from Isaiah, in which we read that Cyrus subdues “nations before him”, that he is able to “ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before him that gates may not be closed”, that he is able to “level the mountains, ... break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron”. Wow! That is one amazing man!!

Yet, who would have thought it to have known him? Curush began small, in a corner of his native land, the area in the south of the country we know today as Iran, in the area near the Straits of Hormuz. Very slowly Cyrus gained power, then expanded his power. First he set his sites on the empire of the Medes, a large empire that began in northern Iran and occupied the land from present day western Turkey to present day Afghanistan. Then once he had conquered the Medes, he set his sites on the rich empire of the Lydians of eastern Turkey. These two conquests made him emperor of a kingdom that stretched from the hills of Afghanistan to the very edge of the Mediterranean. From that point on in history as many of us know it here in the West, the Persians would face off against the Greeks, who were on the other side of the Aegean Sea in conflicts that would shape the way we think about history and even talk about sporting events, from the Olympics to the many marathons that are now run around the world.

But it was Cyrus’s last conquest that we as Christians especially remember. He turned his eyes south from the former kingdoms of the Medes and Lydians and set his eyes on the mighty Babylonian Empire, which had ruled the Middle East from its homeland in present day Iraq for some 200 years. You will all doubtless remember the Babylonian Empire as the empire that conquered Judah under king Nebuchadnezzar, who destroyed Jerusalem and the Temple that Solomon had built, and exiled the people of Israel by bringing them into their own land to serve as slaves. There the people of Israel had languished in slavery, much as they had in Egypt centuries before. For 70 years they cried to the Lord, who had promised them deliverance. And that deliverance arrived... in the person of Cyrus, the Persian emperor.

Cyrus and his troops invaded Babylon and within days had subdued the mighty armies of Babylon. Then, only a short time afterwards and to the amazement of the Israelites, one of the first things that Cyrus did was to free them to return home and to rebuild their land, including their Temple. Cyrus's policy toward the Jews was actually very similar to his policy toward other conquered peoples. For not only did he establish the greatest empire the world has ever known but he also established one that actually worked! In every land that he conquered, he allowed the people to set up their own form of self-government, as long as it was loyal to him. He also ensured that the rights of peoples within his empire were respected. In this, Cyrus provided a model for how other empires in the world might successfully govern captive peoples, including how the Allies governed Europe after WW II.

But, though this was how Cyrus governed throughout his empire, to the Jews, whom he released from their 70 years of captivity, they knew that this was not just any emperor. This was the Lord's man, fulfilling the Lord's promise that the Lord had made to them 70 years earlier. You can imagine how they felt. The very elderly might even have remembered from their earliest childhood what Israel had been like, but the vast majority had died in their exile. It was now their children's children who would be headed home, home to a place that they had never known, even as the Egyptian exiles were freed by God to return to Israel, a place that none of them had ever known. Israelite scholars, like the scribes who had worked for the prophet Jeremiah, or for those who had known the great prophet Daniel, knew exactly what this meant: as God Himself had done for the people of Israel in the Exodus from Egypt centuries before, so now God had done for the people of Israel, captive in Babylonia for 70 years, through the hand of King Cyrus.

And this is what Isaiah heard when he heard the Lord God of Israel speaking to this pagan: I have enabled you to do what you are now doing. *Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus: I have grasped your right hand to subdue nations before you and to ungird the loins of kings, to open doors before you that gates may not be closed:* <sup>2</sup> *"I will go before you and level the mountains, I will break in pieces the doors of bronze and cut asunder the bars of iron,* <sup>3</sup> *I will give you the treasures of darkness and the hoards in secret places, that you may know that it is I, the LORD, the God of Israel, who call you by your name. (Isa 45:1-3 RSV)*

It is by God's power that Cyrus has actually been able to subdue the Medes, and the Lydians, and now the Babylonians. In fact, God tells him, nothing can stand before him, neither mountains nor gates of bronze... because God is with him. God tells him that He will give Cyrus treasure beyond measure because God calls Curush by name.

But, what is that name? The name that God knows him by is not "Curush", humiliator of enemies" but rather a name that probably escaped you when I read the passage from Isaiah: *Thus says the LORD to his anointed, to Cyrus*". The name by which God calls Cyrus is "anointed", in the Hebrew "moshiach" a word we translate into English as "Messiah". That word can also be translated into Greek as "Christos". Both words are often translated into English by a single word that we know well: Christ. In other words, Isaiah hears God saying to Cyrus: It is I who will enable you to overwhelm your enemies. It is I who will make it so that no one and no thing can withstand you. It is I who will give you treasures unknown. For I call you Anointed, Messiah, Christ. And not just that but "my anointed", the one, God says, who has been anointed by God!

The obvious question that you should be asking is: why? How can this Gentile be called by God not just "anointed" but "my anointed", the one that I have anointed? The answer comes clearly in what Cyrus did: he released God's people from their bondage. As God had released the people of Israel from their bondage in Egypt, so now, Cyrus, the Persian king, releases God's people from their Babylonian captivity and allows them to return home.

Cyrus was an amazing figure, who conquered nations. He governed justly and he governed well. He freed the people of Israel from Babylonian captivity and for that reason the people of Israel knew that Cyrus was divinely favoured, God's own anointed. But, his reign lasted less than a generation, only 30 years. 30 years!

He accomplished a lot in 30 years. So did Alexander the Great, whose empire basically swallowed up the Persian Empire. Not too many people can say that they've accomplished that much in 30 years. Do you know anyone who has achieved as much as Cyrus did in that time?

Of course you do. You and I call ourselves "followers of the anointed", "Christians", that's what the word means: followers of the anointed. But, it is not Cyrus, "my anointed", that you and I are following, is it? It is another, also declared by God, "my anointed", 'today I have begotten you... this is my son, listen to him... the Christ, the son of the living God... and yes, Peter, flesh and blood has not revealed that to you but my Father who is in heaven.'

It is not the devourer of nations, against whom no nation or bronze gate can stand, who will govern the nations of the known world politically with justice and virtue, whom we follow. It is the Lord of nations, whose "property is to have mercy", against whom no gate of Hell can stand, who will govern all men and women everywhere with God's justice and judge them by God's righteousness... he is the one that you and I follow. And his name is Jesus.

But, there is a connection between these two, Cyrus and Jesus.

There is a nice expression in logic that tells us that we can properly make statements like the following: if it is true that you can lift something that weighs 100 lbs, it is probably even more likely that you can lift something that weighs 50 lbs; if it is true that you are completely virtuous in every respect, then it is probably even more likely that you are a just person, or that you are a kind person. This logical expression is *a fortiori*: if John, who is 17 is too young to drive, then Fred his brother who is 16 is too young to drive; if Hank who is 18 is NOT too young to go to war, then his brother Herman, who is 19, is not too young.

If Cyrus, who is just a man, and who achieved what he achieved through the strength of his arm, and who governed well, and who after 30 years slept with his fathers his work having been completed can be called by God "my Messiah" because he freed Israel from slavery, then how much more can Jesus, who is God made flesh, who caused armies to be routed by his word, and who, after 30 some years was crucified, died, and was buried, and the third day he rose from the dead, ascended into heaven, and is seated at the right had of God the father, whence he shall come to judge the living and the dead, and who in doing so freed not just the people of Israel but all people of every nation and race under heaven -- including Israel -- from death... how much more should he be called "my anointed, my messiah, my Christ" *a fortiori*. If to Cyrus, "my Messiah", God gave the promise that he would overwhelm all his enemies, that no one would be able to withstand him, and that he would have treasures of the earth beyond measure, then how much more should God the Father call Jesus "my messiah" to whom not only all earthly enemies would fall but also the great enemies of Satan and death, one whom no one, on earth, or in heaven or hell beneath the earth would be able to stand, even the gates of Hell themselves, one to whom all the riches of earth are as nothing compared with the riches of heaven. *A fortiori*.

And so, now, Peter Robinson, what does this have to do with you?

The soldiers who fought under the banner of Cyrus served him faithfully and were rewarded. The Persian troops went on to greatness and glory. As any student of Western history knows, these great troops were eventually defeated by a rag tag bunch of farmers in a little known land called Greece. There at places that have become legend in military history -- at Marathon, at Thermopylae, at Salamis, and others -- the mighty armies of the descendants of Cyrus fell to a bunch of farmers who rose up to defend their lands. There the great Persian empire experienced its first, major defeats until they were entirely routed by another great, young military ruler, this time from the little land of Macedonia, named Alexander.

But, my dear friend and brother Peter, how much greater than the soldiers of God's anointed, Cyrus the Great, or even of Alexander the Great, are the soldiers of God's yet greater anointed, Jesus Christ, our Lord?

If the soldiers of Cyrus, the devourer of nations, went forward from victory to victory, because God was with Cyrus... if the soldiers of Cyrus experienced something of the riches of the earth because the plunder of nations was distributed to them by their great king, Cyrus, the Lord's anointed, ... how much more *a fortiori* will the soldiers of Christ, called to fight manfully under the banner of our anointed, God's anointed, whose kingdom shall never fail... how much more will these go forth from victory to victory, not serving the devourer of nations, but the great shepherd of the sheep, in whose service they shepherd the sheep when all others abandon them and run away. If Cyrus's soldiers were given great treasures by their magnanimous king, how much more *a fortiori* will those who serve God's anointed Jesus be given treasures that are far more than we can ask or imagine, treasures that, as the apostle Paul says in Ephesians, God pours forth upon his followers from the rich storehouses of heaven.

And you, my brother Peter, are called to be a model before your people, both of how they are to serve their King, and of how their King loves them. Like it or not, as priest, you will be called to live a life that by its diligence and duty reflects to them and to the world that this is how a faithful servant of the Lord serves. But, you are also called to live a life that by its holiness and righteousness and sacrifice presents them with a visible model of how God loves His church, making it holy and righteous through His own sacrifice.

In doing so, the walls of the church will become larger and larger until one day the kingdoms of this earth -- Persian or Iranian, Greek or European, American and Canadian -- become the kingdom of our God and of His anointed, not Cyrus, but Jesus.

And you might start, Peter, by asking your people what they have accomplished in 30 years? Cyrus, with God's help accomplished what he did in just 30 years. Our Lord gave of himself and in 30 years changed the face of the universe. What have you accomplished -- with the immeasurable power of God and the unimaginable riches of the Lord available to you -- in 30 years? Cyrus was told that mountains would not withstand him; we are told that we can move mountains. Peter: it is time to lead your people. May Jesus, God's anointed one, give you his blessing as you do, in His strength and for His glory. Amen.