

Christmas

Whether or not 2021 has been good to you, it's Christmas. A year ago in the thick of the pandemic we all expected that next year would be better. It is, but probably not as glorious as many were hoping. Other events have surely shaped how you feel about this past year.

Isaiah prophesied to a people in exile who were having a bad year every year. The end of it came rather suddenly when a Gentile ruler, Cyrus, decided out of nowhere to let them go home to Jerusalem. The opening of the first reading for this Christmas Mass imagines how that news was distributed. Today, of course, you can tweet news instantly to your friends, but in those days, you had a messenger service that operated completely on foot. The fastest runners sprinted from one town to another to announce the events of the day. Isaiah's runner is bounding across mountains. Even before he opens his mouth to tell the beautiful message, people notice how beautiful are his feet: "How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of him who brings glad tidings, announcing peace, bearing good news, announcing salvation."

When he finally speaks, he says four words: "Your God is King." In a world of competing religions, he probably emphasized the first word: "*Your* God is King"—not somebody else's god and not Cyrus. "You, the underdog, the people who had relatives and friends languishing in exile, your God is King." The world was coming right again. Jerusalem, desolate and destroyed, was rising up again before their eyes.

Isaiah prophesied something more: "all the ends of the earth will behold the salvation of our God." God was doing this to restore his own people, but all the earth were going to hear about it. Everyone would come to know the salvation of our God, his power of all adversity, his love for his people.

This reading especially fits Christmas Day because it repeats the word "salvation". That is the message that the runner brings, and it is the accomplishment that the nations will behold. Later, a different runner—well, a flyer—the angel Gabriel, would tell Mary her child would be called "Jesus" because he would "save" his people from their sins. The name "Jesus" means "savior", the one who brings "salvation". He is the message that the angel brings; he is the accomplishment that all the nations will behold.

When things go wrong, it's natural to feel down. We get discouraged by our inability to do things that others can do, by choices we've made that have borne sour fruit, by sadness afflicting people we love, by loss of property, health and life. Sometimes the bad news fills a whole year. We wonder, "Who can save me from this?"

Well, that's Jesus' job description: saving. It's even his name. He can save us from fixating too much on materialism, pride and selfishness, too much on the priorities of this world: glamor, health and wealth. He corrects us when we make something else or someone else king of our life. Christ, our God, is our King. When we love him, trust him, believe in the meaning of his name, no year is a bad year. Each one is a year of grace.