

“Return to the Lord Who Has Redeemed You!”

Isaiah 44:21-28

“Remember these things, O Jacob, and Israel, for you are my servant; I formed you; you are my servant; O Israel, you will not be forgotten by me. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; *return to me, for I have redeemed you*. Sing, O heavens, for the LORD has done it; shout, O depths of the earth; break forth into singing, O mountains, O forest, and every tree in it! For the LORD has redeemed Jacob and will be glorified in Israel.

Thus says the LORD, your Redeemer, who formed you from the womb: “I am the LORD, who made all things, who alone stretched out the heavens, who spread out the earth by myself, who frustrates the signs of liars and makes fools of diviners, who turns wise men back and makes their knowledge foolish, who confirms the word of his servant and fulfills the counsel of his messengers, who says of Jerusalem, “She shall be inhabited,” and of the cities of Judah, “They shall be built, and I will raise up their ruins”; who says to the deep, “Be dry; I will dry up your rivers”; who says of Cyrus, “He is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill all my purpose”; saying of Jerusalem, “She shall be built,” and of the temple, “Your foundation shall be laid.””

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ!

This week we enter the season of Lent. It is about repentance. Or we can say it is about joyfully returning back to the Lord, and our theme for today is “Return to the Lord, who has redeemed you.” For our meditation today we have our Old Testament reading from Isaiah 44.

Now, we all know that we have our limitations. Limitations of human creatures. More, limitations of fallen human creatures. We know that we are bound by time, we are bound by space, and by our selfishness. The truth is that we exist only here and now, at this moment, and we see and experience only our immediate situation.

That’s where our little worlds, our little lives revolve. And because of all these limitations, and because we are often so self-focused, we don’t know, we cannot and even don’t want to know the true God, and even we Christians struggle to comprehend the awe-inspiring greatness of our God, who has revealed Himself.

But listen to how Isaiah speaks about Him elsewhere: **“Lift up your eyes on high and see [the starry skies]: who created these? He who brings out their host by number, calling them all by name, by the greatness of his might.”** (Isa 40:26)

Look at the starry skies! Who are we comparing to our God?! Who are the mighty of this world?! Again, in the words of Isaiah: **“Behold, the nations are like a drop from**

a bucket, and are accounted as the dust on the scales.” He “brings princes to nothing and makes the rulers of the earth as emptiness.” (Isa 40:15, 23)

Our God, the Creator of the heavens and the earth, He is the Lord over everything. All the nations, all the great and mighty, every turn of the history, every great and every small thing in our lives, they are all in His hand. He is in control. Completely. And He is unstoppable accomplishing His plans.

Today's reading provides one such illustration of the greatness and power of our God. Besides, this is not just about the greatness and the power of our God in general, it is about His greatness and His power... for us. Yes, for you!

Do you know when Isaiah prophesied? Around 700 BC. Let's see what is so unusual and encouraging about those words we heard today. Isaiah was addressing these words of comfort to his brothers and sisters Israelites far away in Babylonian exile.

He speaks to them on behalf of this God who had created them, and had promised to never forget them. As the Holy Spirit speaks through Isaiah, God declares that He will send His shepherd, who will bring Israelites back from exile to the promised land, and their beloved city Jerusalem and the temple of God will be rebuilt again.

Some may wonder, and what is so special about these promises. Sure, sounds nice, sounds comforting, but is there anything that stands out as unusual in what Isaiah announces? Here it is. Time! Yes, time when all of this happens.

God Yahweh spoke this prophecy through Isaiah more than a century before Jerusalem was destroyed and Israelites taken into exile. He writes the message of future comfort for them in exile, while they are still sinning boldly in Jerusalem.

Isaiah wrote down this comforting message more than one and half centuries before they were actually freed from their captivity and brought back to Jerusalem. Do you see – through these prophecies God Yahweh foretold the future of mighty nations, including Babylon and Persia, and told precisely how He will guide it.

But then He also foretold, one and half centuries before it happened, who will be the one who will free His people from their captivity, who will be the promised shepherd who will bring God's people back to their land. And this is incredible!

Probably you have heard about the mighty ancient Persian empire. Perhaps, you have heard about Cyrus the Great, the most famous among Persian kings. The Persian Empire was the world's first superpower. It stretched as far as including territories that we today know as Ukraine, India, Egypt and everything in between.

One and half centuries before Cyrus was able to conquer these vast territories, the Holy Spirit spoke through Isaiah, and this is what He said: **“Cyrus [!] is my shepherd, and he shall fulfill my purpose.”** See! God called him by name, who wasn't even born, the ruler of the empire that didn't even exist.

As Paul wrote in the letter to Romans, this God **“calls into existence the things that do not exist.”** (Rom 4:17) Remember... **“The nations are like a drop from a bucket”** for our God. Our God is God of all creation. God of all history. God of all nations. The earth belongs to Him and everything in it. He knows what He will do, and He can announce it centuries in advance.

We, on the other hand, are so limited. We are even limited in our knowledge of God’s message to us. We don’t even know how much He has revealed to us. The Bible is a thick book, sure, and we are not always the keenest of students either.

Too often we prefer to fill our eyes and ears with shallow entertainment and biased news rather than listening and meditating upon the words and works of our God. Too often we are too concerned with our wants and wishes, no time to listen to Him. However, when our Lord speaks to us, when He reveals to us His loving heart, when we actually do listen, it is an amazing experience. Let’s take today’s reading!

The same almighty and gracious God who through Isaiah spoke to Israel, who foretold how He will guide the fate of nations and empires, the same God Almighty still speaks to us today through the Scripture. He speaks to you. Two and half millennia later, on the other side of the world.

What He wants us to know hasn’t changed that much. The same words written by Isaiah still speak to each one of you: **“Remember these things... I formed you ... you will not be forgotten by me. I have blotted out your transgressions like a cloud and your sins like mist; return to me, for I have redeemed you.”**

How good it is to hear this God saying to you: **“Remember, I formed you, and I will never forget you.”** We are forgetful and we tend to forget the good that our Lord did to us yesterday, even to forget He exists, but He is not like us.

Our Father who is in heaven chose you in Christ before the foundation of the world, He said that your names are written on the palms of His hands. That He will never forget you. He says it, and of that you can be assured.

Then He continues: **“I have blotted out your sins like mist, return to me, for I have redeemed you.”** “To redeem” means “to buy back something that was lost or buying someone out of slavery”. This is God’s grace for you!

He never expects us to make the first step. Even before you were born, He prepared this bountiful planet to be our home. Before He revealed Himself to you, Jesus Christ had already redeemed you paying the highest price – His life.

Our God doesn’t demand “return to me and *then* I will redeem you.” There is no such a deal. There is no deal at all. Instead... It’s grace alone. Abundant and overflowing. In His kindness our Father calls us and invites us: “Return to me, for I have *already* redeemed you! Return and receive everything that I have prepared for you from before the creation of the world!”

That is what our God is like. Your God, your Redeemer. We are so limited, but our God is not. We can love Him only in our embarrassingly limited way, He loves you unconditionally from the very depth of His Fatherly heart.

We struggle to be faithful. As soon as our faith may cost us, may put us in challenging situations, may require something from us, we are ready to freeze, to run, to give up. We are so pathetic. On the other hand, our God, our Father, our Lord Jesus, He is so faithful, He will never forget nor abandon you.

Nothing will scare Him away, not our sins, not our indifference, not our unfaithfulness, no difficulties will stop Him caring for you and gently guiding you. He is ready to overcome all of that so that only He can bring you to be with Him, in New Heavens and New Earth forever. We tend to wander astray, we fail to fear, love and trust Him above everything else, but He is always, always calling us:

“Return to me, for I have redeemed you, so that you may live with me in eternal blessedness! It's me. I am calling you. Yes, you! Listen to my voice. Return to me!”

I pray that God's gracious voice gets through to us, today and every day, and that with His help we would never let go the hand of our God, who has redeemed you, for that is where you belong, that is where you are truly at home.

Return to Him and stay with Him. Forever. For there is no better place to be.

Amen.