



# GOD WILL LEAD US

ELAINE WAINWRIGHT introduces the prophet Baruch encouraging the Hebrew exiles with God's promise of their return to and restoration of their land.

**W**e will hear Baruch 5:1-9 for the First Reading on the second Sunday of Advent. The verses make up the final prophetic oracle of an unknown prophet. His work has been attributed to Jeremiah's scribe who bears the same name, Baruch. The book is not included in the Jewish canon nor that of most Protestant denominations. In the Catholic Lectionary it is one of the Deuterocanonical books. However, readers will hear in this text echoes of other postexilic prophets envisioning the exiles' return to the land of Israel and to Jerusalem.

These prophets can provide inspiration to the ecological reader as

they draw on imagery from the material world to envisage a new future for the people of Israel on their return to their place, their land. Initially, the prophet addresses the city, Jerusalem — destroyed by the Babylonians and left in ruin during exile. It is as if the city is clothed with a garment of "sorrow and affliction".

It takes little imagination for us to call to mind cities of present-day Syria, for instance, that are likewise clothed with a garment of sorrow and affliction. Indeed, there are so many such places enduring sorrow as a result of the manifold ways of devastation of Earth and its peoples. They cry out for a restoration that is not just human but ecological.

## Dressing for a New Time

The prophet challenges the exiles to take off sorrow and affliction and to be reclothed. One image of this reclothing is to put on "the cloak of God's justice" (Bar 5: 2). The prophet also gives the city, Jerusalem, a new name — righteous peace, Godly glory (Bar 5:4). The words "justice" and "righteousness" permeate the new vision. They evoke right ordering, the ordering that is of God and God's desire for the universe. For us, today, this must include the other-than-human. Habitat, the human and the holy must all be caught up in the vision of "righteous peace and godly glory".

## Vision of Exiles' Return

The return of the exiles is envisaged in a number of ways. The prophet recalls their being led away on foot and contrasts this with the image of their being carried back as would be a triumphant ruler. It is imagery



### Baruch 5:1-9 [Reading for the Second Sunday of Advent]

- Baruch 5:1 Take off the garment of your sorrow and affliction, O Jerusalem, and put on forever the beauty of the glory from God.
- 2 Put on the robe of the righteousness that comes from God; put on your head the diadem of the glory of the Everlasting;
  - 3 for God will show your splendour everywhere under heaven.
  - 4 For God will give you evermore the name, "Righteous Peace, Godly Glory."
  - 5 Arise, O Jerusalem, stand upon the height; look toward the east, and see your children gathered from west and east at the word of the Holy One, rejoicing that God has remembered them.
  - 6 For they went out from you on foot, led away by their enemies; but God will bring them back to you, carried in glory, as on a royal throne.
  - 7 For God has ordered that every high mountain and the everlasting hills be made low and the valleys filled up, to make level ground, so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God.
  - 8 The woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command.
  - 9 For God will lead Israel with joy, in the light of God's glory, with the mercy and righteousness that come from God.

of the humans. It is followed by the use of Earth imagery: the flattening of mountains and hills, the filling in of valleys. The reason given for such a transformation of Earth is that "Israel may walk safely in the glory of God" (Bar 5:7).

As ecological readers, we are aware of the ways in which Earth can be violently manipulated to serve human ends – mining, agriculture and industry to name a few. Mountains can be flattened and valleys filled in as the prophet envisages. And for Baruch, this is to serve the needs of the exiles – that they have a route of return along which they can travel safely.

#### Critique and Reclamation

We discover as we engage with this prophetic vision of hope expressed through Earth imagery, that ecological reading entails a twofold movement similar to prophetic reading.

Initially, it is necessary to *critique* those aspects of the prophet's vision that fail to evoke ecological justice and fullness of life for all Earth and Earth beings. And so we look closely at the imagery of flattening hills and filling in valleys as a manipulation of Earth for human need.

Having undertaken the critique, we now engage in the second phase, namely the *reclamation* of the text and its message.

The text says that the flattening of mountains and filling in of valleys is part of God's work in returning the exiles – "so that Israel may walk safely in the glory of God". The reader discerns what is the right and just relationship within the Earth community of the human and other-than-human at different points along their shared journey.

The image that the prophet selects to give expression to this right and just relationship is significant for the ecological reader: the woods and every fragrant tree have shaded Israel at God's command (Bar 5:8). Human wisdom knows how important trees are for the health and survival of the planet and all its constituents. The prophet draws on this wisdom and

returns it to the human community.

The ancient prophet concludes his words of hope to a displaced people with a promise: God will lead Israel with the mercy and righteousness/justice that come from God. Righteousness or justice is the right ordering of relationships. The prophet sees these relationships of mercy and justice among the human community and with God.

We think of mercy and justice as core ecological virtues, ways of living and being. Were Baruch preaching today he might conclude his prophecy in this way:

*"For God will lead the Earth community with joy, In right relationship with God, with the mercy and justice that come from God." ★*



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