

## Going through the motions

In Isaiah chapter 29 there is a sequence of verses which cries out for explanation. The mood is set up in verses 5-9, with an image of disturbing dreams: the hungry dream of food and the thirsty dream of drinking, but both awake with their needs unsatisfied. In verses 9-12 the mystery deepens. It seems the illusion has been created by God. (This is by no means unusual in the Hebrew Bible, which attributes lots of things to God rather than deal with the idea that there might be a 'counter-god'). People are offered a sealed document to read. Those who can read complain that they cannot because the document is sealed. Those who cannot read are also unable to read the document they have been offered, because ... they cannot read!

Finally, in verses 13 and 14 the condition of the people is expressed in a denunciation of empty worship, the recital of rote-learned texts. God's response is to promise astounding (NIV) shocking and amazing (NRSV) things. The greatest minds will be confounded, the cleverest will find themselves baffled.

As so often in the scriptures we are confronted with a conundrum. How does this work?

I draw two conclusions from this.

**First**, working with a text from a different culture is not simply a matter of matching word for word. Sometimes the way writers from other backgrounds use language is fundamentally different. Can anyone remember the pronouncements that came from Mao's China years ago, about 'capitalist lackeys', 'running dogs' and 'paper tigers'? These phrases represented such a very strange way of using language – any language – that ordinary citizens of western countries were completely baffled, unable to make any sense of it at all.

In some ways the language of the prophets is equally baffling. We love the picturesque poetry and the vivid imagery ... but how do we translate all this into the world of practical reality? Indeed, is that a meaningful project at all? Doesn't this sort of language 'stand apart from' practical reality altogether? If that is so, is the prophet simply wasting his time? Are we wasting our time reading his words? What effect do we expect the text to have on us who read it 2500 years later in a very different cultural setting? Are we to look through our daily newspapers (or our history books) for events that might match the words of the prophet? Or are we to listen – simply listen – and let the anger, the dismay, the elation, filter into our own consciousness. And then, inspired (or fired up) by that process of reflection, are we then to respond? The prophetic text is not a motor-repair manual, with detailed accounts of how to remove this, adjust that, replace something else.

**Second**, what is the prophet getting at with his criticism of empty or false worship? Is it simply about hypocrisy, saying one thing and doing another? Perhaps it can be read in that way, but there is another way of looking at it. The prophet is expressing dismay that people take the letter of belief seriously, but

not the spirit. It's not just about saying the approved words in the correct way at the appropriate time. For in the Prophet's view those false worshippers were (as we might say) 'going through the motions' in order to avoid getting involved in the real business of working out what faithfulness required of them. They were covenant people by habit, not in the depth of their hearts.

There are several places in the Gospel where we are given the same treatment. Think of the man who built his house on sand (Matthew chapter 7). Think of the places where we are reminded that it is important to be 'doers of the word', not hearers only. Think of the seed sown in poor soil.

The biblical message is clear enough. Don't rest content with 'going through the motions'. Don't settle for being Christians by habit. Let the gospel become part of you. Listen, respond, and live.