



## **Bibliophile #1**

Isaiah – ‘The Fifth Gospel’.

The book of the prophet Isaiah has sometimes been described in Christian history as ‘the fifth gospel’. It is not surprising why. The gospel writers often drew upon Isaiah’s prophecies in order to interpret the meaning and significance of Jesus’ life.

The Christmas story (birth narrative) told by Matthew owes much to Isaiah. The reference to a ‘young woman’ with a child whose name will be Immanuel is taken from Isaiah. That is not the end of Matthew’s reliance on Isaiah as we shall see.

Isaiah is the longest of the prophetic books. In current scholarship it is divided into 3 sections because it seems to cover such a wide expanse of time. First Isaiah covers chapters 1 to 39; Second Isaiah covers chapters 40 to 55; and Third Isaiah runs from chapter 55 to 66. The ‘original Isaiah’ appears to have lived roughly between 760 and 700 BCE and during the time of conflict with the Assyrians; Second Isaiah takes place against the background of living in exile in Babylon towards the time of that city’s fall. Second Isaiah seems to have been writing around the year 540BCE. Third Isaiah is written on the return to Jerusalem.

Our reading this morning (Isaiah 42;1-9) comes from Second Isaiah. It is the first of four ‘servant songs’ (49:1-6; 50:4-9 and 52:13-53:12). Christian writers have tended to equate the servant with Jesus; in their own setting the servant might have been the Persian king, Cyrus, or Israel itself.

Reading and meditating on these four songs makes a fine Lenten discipline.

(To be continued)