
Sunday 13th December – The Third Sunday of Advent

Readings: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 & John 1:6-8, 19-28

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
and provide for those who grieve in Zion –
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendour.

They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for generations.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

There was a man sent from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify concerning that light, so that through him all might believe. He himself was not the light; he came only as a witness to the light.

Now this was John's testimony when the Jewish leaders in Jerusalem sent priests and Levites to ask him who he was. He did not fail to confess, but confessed freely, 'I am not the Messiah.'

They asked him, 'Then who are you? Are you Elijah?'

He said, 'I am not.'

'Are you the Prophet?'

He answered, 'No.'

Finally they said, 'Who are you? Give us an answer to take back to those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?'

John replied in the words of Isaiah the prophet, 'I am the voice of one calling in the wilderness, "Make straight the way for the Lord."'

Now the Pharisees who had been sent questioned him, 'Why then do you baptise if you are not the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?'

'I baptise with water,' John replied, 'but among you stands one you do not know. He is the one who comes after me, the straps of whose sandals I am not worthy to untie.'

This all happened at Bethany on the other side of the Jordan, where John was baptising.'

Reflection

These are wonderfully rich portions of scripture to dwell on. The first passage has been made more familiar because Jesus read from this passage in his first recorded sermon in Luke 4:18-19. Jesus then went on to declare that he was the fulfilment of the prophecy contained in this passage. I imagine the full gravity of what he said then may not have been fully understood by his hearers.

By declaring that he was the fulfilment of the prophecy, he conveyed so much meaning with so few words. He was declaring that God's great redemption promises were being fulfilled right there in their own time, that God was personally fulfilling his promises through the life of Jesus. Almighty God personally fulfilling his promises? Awe and worship well up inside me.

In reading the passage I am reminded of Jesus' words in Matthew 9 that he came to call sinners, not the righteous. There is a definite sense in the reading that unparalleled joy awaits those who know they are poor, broken-hearted, blind, or imprisoned; those who know they need a saviour. Everything outside of God and the

Bible teaches us that accomplishment and accumulation should be our primary goals. God teaches us that what we truly want and truly need is found only in him.

God teaches us that we were made for him and, as a consequence, that all we truly want, the true fulfilment of all our desires, is found in him. When we acknowledge we have nothing on our own, we receive everything in him. It is yet another example of how God works things for his glory and our good. My own experience in life has validated this: the things which bring God the most glory are also the best things for me.

In the reading from John's gospel we read about how John came as a witness to our wonderful Saviour. In reading verse 19-28, I am struck by the fact that John had three sets of visitors to his place of ministry: priests, Levites, and later Pharisees. John was evidently living in a way that provoked a lot of positive interest; so positive in fact, that his visitors suspected he might be the messiah. John however, sets us a good example by simply pointing to Jesus. John knew his need of a saviour and that in the light of Jesus' greatness, he could only respond to his questioners in humility, helping prepare them to find God's promised redemption in Jesus.

When we obey Jesus, we are likely to attract interest too. Hopefully it is positive interest in the form of questions as to why our marriages are so vibrant and healthy, why we treat money like it's not ours to begin with, or why we forgive so freely. Maybe it would be inquiries as to why we have unusual hope, joy, or contentment. God's presence in us can only make us (attractively) different from a world that doesn't yet know him. Hopefully we will follow John's example and when people see how wonderfully different we are, and how differently we live, then we too will simply point to Jesus.

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