



Revd Ro's Reflection on Third Sunday of Advent

Isaiah 61. 1-4, 8-11

John 1. 6-8, 19-28

This week's Reflection flows almost seamlessly from last week's. We light the third of our Advent candles on Sunday and this candle is called the candle of love. The theme is John the Baptist. Last week the theme was the prophets and our gospel reading was about John as the last in the line of God's prophets and the herald of good tidings.

It is always useful to put readings in their context and this is important here. Beginning with the Isaiah passage, we know that the people had been forced to spend something like fifty years in exile in Babylon with all that meant to them. Only a small remnant was still living in Jerusalem. It was a Jerusalem that had suffered desolation at the hands of the Babylonians and this time, the destruction of the Temple.

After those years of bitter exile came the victory of the Persians over the Babylonians. The enlightened King Cyrus of Persia allowed the Jewish people to return home to rebuild and worship in their own way.

It is interesting to note here that Cyrus has been hailed as having written the first 'Declaration of Human Rights Charter.' It was carved on a cylinder, known as the Cyrus Cylinder; it is now in the British Museum but importantly and significantly a replica of it is kept at the headquarters of the United Nations.

So the people came home, but they were still under foreign rule and with no king, not even a puppet one. If we look at Isaiah 60 we can see how this shows God's promise to restore his people to their homeland because, whatever their failures, his love for them has always been constant. The beginning of Isaiah 60 is famous,

60 'Arise, shine; for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord has risen upon you.

² For darkness shall cover the earth,
and thick darkness the peoples;

but the Lord will arise upon you,
and his glory will appear over you.

³ Nations shall come to your light,
and kings to the brightness of your dawn.'

The whole of this chapter speaks of restoration by the Lord. Not only will the people be coming home but nations, who were oppressors, will be helping in the restoration. Jerusalem is seen as the centre of the Lord's rule. I am reminded of the time I spent in Hereford while I was training for the priesthood. Of course I went to see the earliest existent medieval map of the world, the Mappa Mundi. Well on that chart it is Jerusalem that is at the centre. That is because it is a map of the Christian world. This is the image here in Isaiah; Jerusalem should stand for the worship of the one true God.

God punished his people for their faithlessness but he has turned to them in love once more.

¹⁰ 'Foreigners shall build up your walls,
and their kings shall minister to you;
for in my wrath I struck you down,
but in my favour I have had mercy on you.'

We can see that this would be music to the ears of a downtrodden and suffering people. For a change nations will be serving them. But actually it is not just on this literal level. Isaiah is promising a new creation, a new way, when all will turn to God in love. The nations as portrayed here are not in servitude. They come to acknowledge the supremacy of God and to worship him. It is an image of God's new creation. Isaiah would have seen this as restoring the land laid waste but it is also an image of the restoration of the earth at God's new creation when the Messiah comes in glory to rule. The passage is actually inclusive; all are welcome to turn to God.

¹⁹ 'The sun shall no longer be
your light by day,
nor for brightness shall the moon
give light to you by night;
but the Lord will be your everlasting light,
and your God will be your glory.'

Here once again is an image of this glorious day of God.' We have studied a great deal of St. Paul's writing this year. This is exactly what he has been preaching. God will create a new and perfected order and the one who will be the judge and ruler of this will be the Messiah.

All this may sound like preamble, actually it is anything but. Look how our reading begins Isaiah 61.
1.

61' The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;'

Isaiah has throughout, spoken of a redeemer, a saviour, a suffering servant, a King of the Davidic line, who will restore his people. We know the word Christ, means the Anointed One, the Messiah. What huge significance these lines have in the light of this. This reading is set for Advent purposely. Advent is looking forward to the coming of God in man, the Messiah who will redeem his people

and also to his second coming when he will rule over and judge the earth at God's perfected new creation.

The New Testament writers read these verses from Isaiah and wrote of them in terms of Jesus as the promised Messiah. That is how we as Christians read them now. Jesus, as we saw last week, was given the scroll of the prophet Isaiah when he went to the synagogue. What did he choose to read-these words.

When Jesus said, 'because he has anointed me,' that is exactly what he meant. He was saying in no uncertain terms, 'I am the Messiah' and he put it in plain terms when he said at the end of the reading.' Today in your hearing these words have come true.'

So we read this passage in the light of our belief in Jesus, our King and Saviour. What the Saviour will do should be seen on two levels, Firstly the literal level and secondly the deeper level.

'he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.'

On one level Jesus, the Messiah will be ministering to the poor, the downtrodden. The constant theme throughout the bible is God demanding that those who follow him care for the marginalised in society symbolised by 'the widow and orphan.' So often of course they were not served or helped but oppressed. You cannot serve God unless you care for others.

'For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing; '

Actually it is what is in a person's heart that matters. How many times has Jesus railed at the people, particularly the religious leaders, who worship God with their mouths but do not live the ways of God out in their lives?

²³"Woe to you, scribes and Pharisees, hypocrites! For you tithe mint, dill, and cummin, and have neglected the weightier matters of the law: justice and mercy and faith. It is these you ought to have practiced without neglecting the others.' Matthew 23.

The Messiah, the Anointed One puts on his role like a garment,
'I will greatly rejoice in the Lord,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,'

Think of the Queen about to be anointed at her coronation. The robe she wears at the anointing is different from the robes for the rest of the service. A priest wears a chasuble at a Holy Communion service. So often the clothes one wears represent a role. So it is here but it goes so much further for the clothes are salvation and righteousness the role of Jesus our Saviour and redeemer.

Now I have said that the Advent theme for this Sunday is John the Baptist. Our Gospel reading however does not follow on from the story of John from the gospel of Mark which was set for last week. No, instead the passage that has been chosen is from the first chapter of the gospel of John. That is no accident for our reading follows directly from arguably the greatest acclamation of the divinity of Jesus Christ ever written.

The passage which begins John's gospel is often set for carol services but of course also for Christmas Day. It is hugely familiar, but it is vital that we see our gospel reading today in light of that passage and indeed as following on from our reading from Isaiah. John chapter I is cosmic and it states quite clearly Jesus' co-existence and equality with God the creator.

¹'In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.'

Jesus is the second person of the Trinity, co-creator with God,

³All things came into being through him, and without him not one thing came into being. What has come into being ⁴in him was life, and the life was the light of all people. '

Jesus is the light in the darkness, a light that nothing can quench. It is then, with this passage in mind, that we are introduced to John the Baptist.

⁶ 'There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.'

John now takes on a huge significance. He is sent from God to bear witness to Jesus Christ; to God incarnate. He is not the Creator, the Saviour, the Messiah, he is the forerunner.

Our gospel reading continues at verse 19, so misses a few verses beginning, 'This is the testimony given by John. Well it is worth seeing what that was he was testifying to.

¹⁵'(John testified to him and cried out, 'This was he of whom I said, "He who comes after me ranks ahead of me because he was before me." ') ¹⁶From his fullness we have all received, grace upon grace. ¹⁷The law indeed was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ. ¹⁸ No one has ever seen God. It is God the only Son, who is close to the Father's heart, who has made him known.'

This is what he testified, that Jesus is human and divine sent by God to earth; the fulfilling not only of the law and the prophets, bringing God's truth and grace. He is the only one who has seen the Father because he is of him.

This testimony was given by John when the powers that be sent the religious rulers to demand why he was saying and doing such things. From the start John knows his role and states it clearly. 'No I am not the Messiah.'

²¹And they asked him, 'What then? Are you Elijah? Elijah was believed to return before the Messiah's arrival. The answer is an emphatic 'No,' John knows his role,

'I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
"Make straight the way of the Lord" ',
as the prophet Isaiah said.'

This takes us back to last week's readings both from Isaiah and from Mark. John is the herald, the one sent to prepare the way for the Messiah by announcing the good news of his coming and by getting the people to turn from their sins.

John is emphatic about it. He is not fit to untie the sandal of God's Son.

²⁶John answered them, 'I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.' ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.'

Jesus will of course come to John for baptism and John will recognise him as the promised one.

It is worth noting that part of the passage of John 1 has been omitted to concentrate on John's role.

¹⁰ He was in the world, and the world came into being through him; yet the world did not know him. ¹¹He came to what was his own, and his own people did not accept him. ¹²But to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God, '

Jesus comes into the world as Emmanuel, God with us, but people reject him. However, and it is a huge point, the promises of God are not confined to, 'God's chosen people', but to all who turn to him. This unites the gospel to the Isaiah reading.

All are welcome to God's kingdom if they accept Jesus Christ as Lord and God. Both passages are inclusive. We, all who confess Jesus, are children of God.

I always find it profoundly moving when I baptise children and adults. At our baptism we are welcomed into the priesthood of all believers. As it says in the Isaiah passage,

⁶ 'but you shall be called priests of the Lord,
you shall be named ministers of our God;'

John was the herald of Jesus, he not only boldly proclaimed his advent but taught that all who confessed God's way must live in it. We, this Advent, are called to do just that.

'On Jordan's bank the Baptist's cry announces that the Lord is nigh, Awake and harken for he brings glad tidings of the King of Kings.'

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