

NAURC Worship at Trinity URC

Advent 3: Isaiah 61: 1-4 & 8-11

Isaiah 61: 1-4

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
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.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

Isaiah 61: 8-11

For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ 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,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Sermon

> This week we continue to be guided by the book of Isaiah through Advent.

> In the first week we looked at the image of how we can make ourselves open and available to shaped by God much like a potter does with clay.

> Last week, the image was that of road building, and we thought about how what we need to do to make the way smooth and clear for God to come and meet us.

> This week's image is of a herald of good news. Having had a background in newspapers the image from yesteryear of a newspaper seller at a stand shouting out 'read all about it – this is good news for many!' appeals to me.

> This week's reading from Isaiah 61 week is also to be found near the end of the book and, as in the preceding two weeks, addressed to the people who have returned from exile in Babylon.

> Many of the references in the text about rebuilding cities reduced to rubble and an end to suffering and grief are specific to that situation.

> As I reflected last week, our setting is not identical, but I think the theme of just how much God's Good News is needed remains of the highest importance this year.

> Those returning from exile were in desperate need of good news – the whole world suffering loss and isolation resulting from a pandemic is also in need of some good news!

> In Britain, in particular this month, not only are we still having to be extra careful to keep each other safe as we await vaccination, there is also the deeply unsettling effects of economic instability and the uncertainty that dare I say it? Brexit brings.

> The third Sunday of Advent is traditionally the day when there is a 'let-up' in the penitential tone of the season and the mood becomes much more joyful.

> This brighter, more hopeful outlook comes out clearly from Isaiah 61. Not only do we have the announcement via the prophet from God that there is good news at long last – but there is a list of how the good news will change society.

> How this is brought about is also spoken about, and it involves being given some new clothes.

> By the way, it's not yet another pair of socks for Christmas!

> Isaiah uses the clothing image four times in this passage, on the first occasion in verse three and the remainder in verse 10.

> To begin with, let's turn to the first item of clothing. It's most appropriate for this week of Advent rejoicing as it is the "mantle of praise" (New Revised Standard Version)

> It's natural to get 'down' when the weather is cold, grey and dreary – just as it was when I was writing this sermon – so putting on a 'mantle of praise' gives such encouragement – it's like pulling on a big, bright snugly Christmas jumper – something that lifts your spirits and keeps you warm from the inside out.

> It's the sort of feeling that we get from the first hymn I chose for this morning; "Joy to the world!"

> There is more to this 'mantle of praise' than just a lovely warm, fuzzy feeling in mid-winter though. This new item of clothing has other effects – and there are other items in our new wardrobe too, such as the garments of salvation, the robe of righteousness and a new garland.

> Quite who gets to wear this new outfit is unclear in the text – it may be the prophet, it may be another person who is yet to come – and then our attention turns to Jesus – or it may be God's people who get dressed up this way.

> Let's just stick with the mantle of praise for the moment, in that praise will involve a lot more than engaged worship, because as verse three continues to explain, it is the people who will be anointed with the 'oil of gladness'. And anointing is the precursor to fulfilling a task.

> That's the message I'd like to share with you from this text – that, although there is the prediction of someone to come who is robed in the garments of salvation – the task of transforming the world with the joy of hope is up to God's people – that's all of us wherever we find ourselves today.

> Clothed with the 'mantle of praise' we are the ones to enact the good news. We are the ones who bring good news to the oppressed, it's our task to bind-up the broken hearted, to bring release and put justice into action. We are the ones who show what righteousness and praise mean!

> What a task, and what an honour. But it leads to an obvious question – that all sounds great, but exactly how do we do this?

> The answer comes in the reading from John's Gospel.

> John (the Baptist) was quite clear in answering the priests and Levites who had been sent out from Jerusalem that his task was to point forward to the one who is to come – just as the author of the Isaiah passage was doing – announcing news of what was going to happen.

> It is the living example of God's very presence within the human race who will show us how to live – what righteousness looks like in real life,

what justice and peace really mean – how to make use of our new mantle of praise day by day.

> That is why we need to prepare the road for the arrival of Jesus as Emmanuel – God with us – so the world may be transformed in a spiritual spring-time of hope, new growth and vibrant rainbows of multi-coloured joy.

> But the coming will surprise many.

> As we looked at last week – the expectation of God’s arrival was that of heaven-splitting, earth shattering magnitude – in fact, God’s Son was to be like a gentle shepherd.

> Again, this week, the assumptions of what the power of God looks like are profoundly challenged. What will the robe of salvation look like?

> Made of the finest silk and covered in jewels?

> No – the robe starts out as swaddling clothes, changes after false charges to a purple robe which is exchanged for grave cloths which are then transformed through resurrection into light itself.

> How, I wonder, will we make use of our mantle of praise to point to the one robed in salvation?

Amen