

Rejoice, give thanks ***Third Sunday of Advent***

Isaiah 61:1-4 and 8 to end

1 Thess 5:16-24

John 1:6-8; 19-28

I think I know what Jesus's favourite bit of the bible was. I think it was the passage from Isaiah which we heard a few minutes ago. And the reason I think it was his favourite is that he read it in public when he began his work as a rabbi. He went into the Synagogue in his home town of Nazareth and he was handed a scroll of the prophet Isaiah. And he found chapter 61, the part that we heard a few minutes ago:

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 brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
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.

Isaiah 61: 1-2

It was as if he was setting out his manifesto, telling anyone who would hear that this was what he was about.

So, what was he about? Or, more to the point, what *is* Jesus about?

I think the words we have heard have three levels of meaning: what they might have meant to the people who heard Isaiah twenty five centuries ago; what Jesus' hearers might have heard; and what we might hear, here, today.

Let's begin with Isaiah. Isaiah was speaking to a nation which had been decimated by war and military occupation. Their situation was rather like that of France in the early 1940's. Isaiah was promising them that their oppression would come to an end, there would be a liberation and it would be God who was working to bring that about. It was a political and military message. But there was a personal and spiritual content as well, because Isaiah speaks of how he personally will be changed and he expresses it in very material images:

He will wear

- a garnet of salvation;
- a robe of righteousness;
- a garland like a bridegroom and
- jewels like a bride.

That is to say God will give him something to rejoice about. He then changes the image and compares himself to a garden which will produce praise. It is as if his life was like a December garden, flat, dull, wet, colourless; and Isaiah is looking forward to that time when it will be full of colour, life, joy.

Fast-forward five hundred years and Jesus is reading these words in the synagogue. Everything has changed and nothing has changed. The Babylonian oppressors of Isaiah's time have been defeated only to be replaced by Greek oppressors who were then replaced by Roman oppressors. Many people in Jesus's time wanted to overthrow the Romans by force and Jesus's words could have been heard as encouragement to do that. But we do not find that political or military emphasis in Jesus's life. He speaks hard words to religious and political leaders – but the criticism is of their lifestyles, their personal morality, rather than their politics. But Jesus consistently brings hope to the people he meets. He heals people of their illnesses, physical, mental and spiritual. He gives people his time; he gives himself to those around him. He wanted to change political systems by changing the people who were in them. And the truth was that his immediate impact was limited. He had perhaps twelve intimate friends – the apostles; perhaps another seventy people whom he could call friends although not close. And then hundreds even thousands of people whom he touched, literally and metaphorically. But

there were millions of people in the world in Jesus' time; and there are billions now. How did Jesus touch those millions? Those billions?

I think there are two answers. One from within and one from without. The answer from within is that he touches us through his Holy Spirit. The Holy Spirit lives in every human heart and waits to be released. That Spirit wants to comfort me and you; he or she wants to set me and you free; she wants to bind up my broken heart and your broken heart. She wants to bring praise out of the garden of our hearts. But in order for him to do that we have to allow him. We have to be still, quiet, to be in touch with that Spirit of God who is in our hearts.

But the love of Jesus Christ comes to us also from without in the form of his people, his followers, the Christian Church. Each one of us is called to share the love of Jesus with those around us. We are called to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted, to proclaim liberty to captives and release to prisoners.

Perhaps you can recall when another person has done that for you – strengthened you, drawn out from you that capacity to rejoice and give thanks. Healed you. Perhaps you can recall when you have done that for someone else. Or perhaps you can't. Often we forget to thank people for their comfort, their encouragement; and so they do not even know how much comfort they have given. It is quite possible that you have given much more encouragement and strength to other people than you realize.

When the Spirit of Jesus works in us in this way the result is that we are able to rejoice and give thanks. There is that age-old question of whether a glass is half full or half empty. The objective answer, of course, is that it is both. I may see it either way but the Spirit of Jesus will lead me to see that it is half full. You may say that it is of no importance – but it is. If I am able to see what is positive in life then I will go into the future with a positive attitude; and if I go into the future with a positive attitude then the future is more likely to be positive. I can change my own future. It is not determined. The future is not given.

I witnessed that recently at a committee meeting which I was part of. One speaker made a rather gloomy, pessimistic observation along the lines of 'Our glass is half empty.' I could feel vibes negative energy washing

round the table. A second member of the committee thought for a few moments and then rephrased the first comment to give it an entirely different meaning along the lines of 'So what you are saying is that our glass is half full'. I felt the positive energy rushing back into the room. The meeting was transformed. Nothing had changed objectively; all that had changed was our attitude.

That is what Isaiah is about; that is what Jesus is about; and that is what Paul is about in his letter to the Thessalonians. The passage we heard a few minutes ago is from the end of the letter. Paul is winding up and giving a last few bits of encouragement. The key bits are these

- rejoice
- pray
- give thanks

But you may say, what if there is nothing to rejoice about, nothing to give thanks for. I think both Paul and Jesus would say 'rejoice and give thanks' all the same. Rejoicing and giving thanks are not reactions to the world out there. Rejoicing and giving thanks are expressions of what is in our hearts. But, you may say, my hearts is not full of rejoicing and thankfulness. I think that in those circumstances Paul and Jesus would say, 'rejoice and give thanks'. If I express with my lips and in my actions the attitudes I most desire then, sooner or later, those attitudes will grow in my heart; and as they grow into heart so I will express them the more and as I express them more so I will change the world around me. The world is not given; it is shaped by each one of us. And God gives each one of us his Spirit to change the world for the better.

Rejoice; give thanks.

N Clews

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