

**Hexham Trinity Methodist Church**  
**Sunday 13th December 2020 - Advent 3**  
**Sermon**

Reading: Isaiah 61:1-11

Prayer

Today is the 3rd Sunday of advent, otherwise known as Gaudete Sunday. In 'normal' years this is often the Sunday of advent that we've missed out on as we've chosen to reflect on Mary on the 3rd Sunday advent in order to leave Mary's traditional spot on the 4th Sunday advent free for the nativity service. I say all that because it's good in these very different times to have chance to look at this great passage from Isaiah together, and to acknowledge there are some benefits and blessings to the situation we find ourselves in.

As we've said already in advent, these weeks leading up to Christmas give us a chance to prepare to celebrate Jesus' birth, to reflect on its significance for us and for the world. It has been great to sit with these words from Isaiah this week and to be amazed again by the fact that words written so long before Jesus' birth spoke of such hope when they were written, when they were fulfilled in Jesus' birth and continue to speak to us today. They are the words which Jesus himself read when he read from the scroll in the temple in Luke 4 and said 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' telling those who heard and us today that he is the fulfilment of these words that Isaiah speaks.

As scripture so often does as we read it, as I study it in preparation for preaching, these words have really resonated with me this week. One of the reasons they've particularly resonated with me this week has been the reminder of why they were written, what the world was like when they were written and who they were written to.

You may know that the book of the prophet Isaiah was written by more than one person, some commentators will say two different authors, some three and others more. The commonly held view is that Isaiah 61 is written by someone different to the person known as 2nd Isaiah who wrote chapters 40 to 55 in which we read the passages that speak of the messiah as a servant. Isaiah 61 is most likely written by someone different but someone who knew of the prophecies of the servant messiah, servant king and therefore there are echoes within chapter 61 of that servant messiah who is to come. Others argue that the echoes of the servant mean it was written by the same person and will tell you there were only two Isaiahs ... I'll let you come to your own conclusions on that!

So we believe chapter 61 is written later than the earlier chapters and by someone informed by the earlier Isaiah. But who was chapter 61 written too, what was the world like when it was

written? The world wasn't in a good place when Isaiah speaks, God's people the people of Israel had faced many different challenges and much opposition to the way that God was calling them to live. As a nation, as a people together things were not good.

The most famous words of this passage are in the opening three verses, the ones that Jesus reads. One readings of these verses is that those the Good News is for and the hearers of the prophecy are all good, upstanding, well rounded people who hear about this Good News which is for the other, for those who captives, broken hearted etc etc. But that isn't the case, those Isaiah speaks to are the broken hearted, are the captives, are the prisoners, are those for whom the world is very dark. In fact the literal translation of the Hebrew at the end of verse 1 is 'to open the eyes for those in darkness', not just freedom from darkness for the prisoners in the sense of those who are in prison, but the opening of the eyes of all those who are living in darkness.

This passage is written for and is spoken to those in distress both physically and spiritually, to those who feel they are living in darkness. This echos those great words from Isaiah chapter 9 which begins 'the people who walked in darkness have seen a great light, on them the light has shined'. The passage speaks into a world which not good for God's people as a whole and was very dark for many individuals.

I think one of the reasons this passage resonated so much with me this week is I feel that as a world and as individuals this is exactly what life is like for us at the moment. The world is of course completely different to the times when Isaiah wrote but it has been a dark and dismal week hasn't it. The days are short, we are not able to do what we'd like to do, we are facing a Christmas like we've never known. Together as a community and for many individuals things are dark and challenging.

In the challenges of Isaiah day, those for the whole community and those as individuals, Isaiah had a task. He had a task to bring Good News, to bring a message of hope which would help and support those he spoke too. In these days of advent we are preparing to celebrate Good News, we are preparing to celebrate the birth of Jesus, we are ensuring we are living ready for Jesus' return.

Gaudete Sunday, this 3rd Sunday of advent, is suppose to be a day of joy in our season of preparation, a day when we step back from our preparations and reflections and acknowledge the Good News that we are going to celebrate in a couple of weeks time. It is the equivalent in advent of mothering Sunday in lent.

The question of course is what is the Good News today? What is it we are pausing from our preparation to reflect on, the find joy in? What does it mean for us this advent, what does it mean amongst a global pandemic? I don't know about you but I certainly need some Good News at the moment.

As I read these words from Isaiah I am reminded that Isaiah has one message to get across above all others and its there in v1 'to proclaim Good News' not to proclaim news that might be good or might be bad, not to proclaim some information which you can decide what it is, but to proclaim Good News. And if there is Good News to proclaim then there is Good News! You can't proclaim Good News if there is no Good News in the first place!

God's people have been through so much, exodus, exile, time in the wilderness, a very long journey to the promised land, wars, conflicts, the splitting up of the kingdoms, so so much and more. Into this Isaiah says clearly there is Good News.

I want to say this morning, loud and clear above everything else, this Christmas, this COVID Christmas, this pandemic Christmas, this Christmas when we might not see our families - THERE IS GOOD NEWS! Even more, unlike Isaiah's first hearers we know what that Good News looks like. They've heard the other prophecies of Isaiah, they've heard about the servant, they know they'll be a Messiah. But we know what the Messiah looks like, we know how the Good News comes about, we know that the Good News is Jesus Christ! The only son of God, born in a stable in Bethlehem to bring salvation, to redeem the world.

At Christmas 2020 there is Good News, it's the same Good News there has been at Christmas for 2000+ years and that Good News is the birth of Jesus Christ! Amen! Amen! Unmute yourselves and say amen! Amen! Amen!

If we are not careful, of course, we can complicate it can't we, we can talk around it and dress it up and try and explain it. But the truth is there is Good News and that Good News is that Jesus Christ was born to save the world, to redeem the world. This is why all the talk of saving Christmas frustrates me so much, Christmas is about Christ, that is the Good News - it's all we need at Christmas. Christ comes to save and his salvation, the Good News of Christmas isn't something that needs to be saved from COVID-19. There is a whole other sermon about why people think Christmas needs saving but that's for another day.

If we are not careful though we can complicate the Good News and dress it up yet these words in Isaiah 61 tell us more about what this wonderful Good News is like. So just briefly I want to take a few moments to share three things from the passage that tell us what this Good News is like.

Firstly, the Good News is for all and particularly for those who are lost. In those opening verses Isaiah tells us who the Good News is for. It's for the poor, the broken hearted, captives, prisoners, those who grieve. The Good News of God is Jesus Christ is for everyone without exception, anyone who chooses to can share in the Good News.

Secondly, the Good News is transformational. Isaiah tells us that the Good News will bind up the broken hearted, that it will bring freedom to the captives. Isaiah tells us that the Good News will bring oil of joy rather than mourning, will bestow a crown of beauty rather than ashes, will bring praise instead of a spirit of despair. The Good News of God in Jesus Christ is for everyone and brings a transformation beyond anything those first hearers or we can ever imagine.

Thirdly, that transformation brings justice. Verse 8 says 'for I the Lord love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing'. There is a way for the world to live, a way which brings goodness not pain, a way that brings joy and not hurt. That way is God's way and through the Good News of Jesus, through Jesus showing us the way to live, through the way of the kingdom God brings a transforming justice to the world, a justice which invites and enables repentance as we heard last week when we looked at John the Baptist, a justice which establishes the righteousness that Isaiah speaks of in verse 10.

**Friends, There is Good News! Good News which is for all, which redeems the world, which is transformative, which brings justice to the world.**

This advent I think we need to be reminded of this and to acknowledge this. To say to ourselves and to the world that in the midst of a global pandemic we are Good News people. And when I say we need to say this to ourselves what I actually mean is we need to say it and say it and say it and say it until it sinks, until it resonates with our hearts, until it's the first thing that comes back to us when we feel frustrated by the rules, when we notice the dark and dismal nights, when we are sad because of the reality of our Christmas celebrations we must remember the Good News. We need to know and know deep in our hearts that there is Good News, the Good News of God in Jesus Christ who redeems the world.

When we get to that place then our hearts will be stirred, in fact to quote John Wesley they will be strangely warmed. It is when our hearts are stirred, when that Good News is deep within us that we will be like Isaiah is in the last two verses of chapter 61. For Isaiah's response to knowing and sharing this Good News is to turn to God in praise and worship, to delight greatly in the Lord, to praise the righteousness of God and the knowledge of it springing up before all nations.

Knowing and living the Good News changed Isaiah's perspective and the perspective of those who heard him speak. Knowing that in all we face that there is Good News, that the Good News is Jesus changes our perspective and transforms us as it has done for generation after generation.

As I said earlier the one significant difference from when Isaiah wrote to today is that we know how the Good News Isaiah speaks of becomes a reality. We know the Good News is fulfilled in Jesus, the christ child born in the stable. Yet that sense of now knowing exactly how things will come to be a reality is very much with us at the moment isn't it. We know we have a vaccine but

we don't know how we'll get it, whether we'll be on the list to get it, what that will mean for social distancing and rules. We know we've left Europe yet we don't what that will mean for trade or prices in the supermarket. Whilst we know that the Good News is with us, whilst we know Jesus offers us that we are not able to see how that transformation that we so need will happen, we are not able to see how justice will prevail.

Whilst that is so hard for us, what this passage in Isaiah and the birth of Jesus remind us of is that the Good News will come about, transformative justice will happen. It might not happen as we expect it to, it might not happen as we want it to, but there is Good News, it can't be taken away and in God's way and God's timing it will prevail.

**There is Good News! There is Good News in Jesus Christ who comes to save and redeem the world!**

As we journey through advent that is something to stop and to celebrate. That is something to pause and let seep deep into our hearts, mind and soul. For when we let the Good News dwell in us then we will truly be ready to celebrate the birth of Jesus, the birth of the King of kings.

So today, in these difficult and challenging times, when maybe we are fed up and frustrated, when the darkness feels like it is overcoming us, let us lift up our hearts and celebrate the Good News. As we do that let it help us to get ready to celebrate Christmas, to celebrate the birth of Jesus and to live as those ready for Christ to return.

This is Good News!

There is Good News!

Amen! Amen!

SILENCE

As we reflect on the Good News we're going to listen to a song recorded by Neil and Sue all about the Good News that comes on the holy night of Christ's birth. Feel free to sit and listen or to sing along if you wish, in your hearts of course if you are here in Church!