

Isaiah 61:1-4,8-11; Psalm 126

Joy for Today and Rejoicing Tomorrow

Last week we heard words of comfort from Isaiah and the voice of one crying hope to God's people walking in a wilderness. This week Isaiah brings good news: a word of restoration, a word of healing, a word that speaks of God's faithfulness, the rich present he brings and the future he has planned in which our heart can take delight.

Instead of thinking about the salvation of God that Jesus brings as a ticket to heaven, an escape from hell, or a visa to some otherworldly fluffy-cloud-hymn-singing future, Isaiah challenges us to imagine something bigger. Salvation as a quality of life here and now, on earth as it is in heaven, of something started here and continuing into eternity, that reflects God's heart and character, his desires for human community, as well as his plans for justice and right-relationships, and the harmony and healing of creation.

That's a big salvation. In these verses it is summed up as 'the year of the Lord's favour.' This image comes from the OT, it is reflecting on a year that was meant to be a regular part of Israel's calendar. The 50th year when all wrongs would be overturned, debts cleared, land restored to those who had lost it, and the community given a fresh start. A year that symbolised God's abundant goodness, forgiveness and blessing and would build a community of justice like no other.

We read this passage of Isaiah at Christmas not just because it reminds us of the good news Isaiah shared with his community who were looking forward to going home after years in exile, and not just because it reminds of the good news of blessing God and Moses had intended be enacted every 50th year as a Year of Jubilee (Leviticus 25:1-23; Deuteronomy 15:1-15). We read it because it reminds us of God's kingdom that Jesus brought to our doorstep the first Advent. Jesus set these words in motion as he read the scriptures in the synagogue that day he stepped into active ministry (Luke 4:17-21).

Today [he said] these words are fulfilled in your hearing.

Good news of hope for today in our real life situations, as well as words of hope for tomorrow when he returns to make all things new.

Words that Challenge the Reality of Now

The words of Isaiah 61 are words of certain joy - but they are proclaimed by the prophet into a community divided, 'where leaders played to privilege; justice was for sale; and sin persisted;' where home towns lay in ruins, and foreign powers held dominion. And yet they are true words of a true salvation, that would come to pass.

There is a contrast between the present situation of corruption and uncertainty and the time for singing we hear in this passage. This is because Isaiah shouts true joy above the shallow songs of Babylon the beautiful oppressor, against the sadness of not-what-it-once-was Jerusalem. His words speak the hopes of the Year of Jubilee against the burden of 49 years of socio-economic breakdown, the hope of justice being restored and a community given a fresh start when they needed it most.

For us too, these words of Isaiah and Jesus sing a true note of present and hoped-for joy through the discords of Christmas we have around us, the merry song that is not quite right. The happy that is too froth and bubble or forced through an awkward smile.

We hear holy songs play out for weeks in Westfield, but the bells ring too closely with the sound of the cash register don't you think? We genuinely delight in the season of giving, and yet it is tarnished with indulgence and greed. We anticipate the shared table, but can't escape the reality of broken relationships, sharp words and those who sit alone with an empty plate not far from our dining room. We long for the feast of celebration but we acknowledge how many people rise to another day of desperation, war and isolation on the same morning we wake to tinsel trees and bow-tied boxes.

Isaiah's message is a word of hope but it is also a reminder that our world is full poor, brokenhearted, captive, imprisoned, mournful, despairing, robbed and wronged people. It tells us God has seen, but the good news is he is doing something about it - he has come to robe the downtrodden as a glorious bride and enter an everlasting covenant of faithfulness and blessing with them.

As Christians we dare not be distracted by the Christmas celebrations and not see the need for healing and restoration around us. We have been named as Christ's own, for Jesus who is the one in whom the hopes and fears of all the years are met, who still brings the year of the Lord's favour to those who have hearts inclined to freedom and ears to listening.

What News Will We Share ?

We have heard good news from Isaiah, and we know Jesus shared the same good news. So what news will we share this Season? Instead of being carried along as advocates of the message of commercial Christmas we might instead hear and share Isaiah's news: a promise of restoration and healing, of God's faithfulness, of a better present that is a deposit on a future in which our heart can delight. We might recapture this as the reason for the season and let it take hold of us and inform what we do.

We might let our hearts leap as they hear Jesus proclaim the year of the Lord's favour. We might intentionally participate with God as he brings joy to the oppressed, brokenhearted, imprisoned, and mournful in places around us and further afield. We might

help people recover the losses they have suffered in life and invite them to a fresh start reconciled with us, others, creation and the Creator himself.

Mission doesn't only happen when we send money and brave Christians to strange destinations. Mission happens when we join God in what he is doing to bring his plans to fulfilment, it happens when the nations of the world notice that the people of God live differently and are different because they spend time with Jesus, and 'are a people whom the LORD has blessed.' What better time to be God's people partnering with him in his plans of redemption and repair than Christmas?

Psalm 126 - A song to sing as we walk up the road to church

The Psalm we have today is a starting place. It's part of a collection inside the Book of Psalms called the songs of Ascents. Songs God's people sang as they walked up through the hill country to their festivals at Jerusalem. They were songs to hum as you ascended to the Temple looking forward to your celebration time with your community and your God, but also reflecting that life wasn't all you wanted it to be, God's kingdom was not on earth as it was in heaven.

Psalm 126 is a song anticipating the day when the hopes of God's people would be fulfilled, it shares the sentiments of Isaiah 61. The writer projects themselves forward and says...

When the Lord restores the fortunes of his people, we will be like those who dreamed.

Our mouths will be filled with laughter, our tongues with songs of joy.

Then it will be said among the nations, "The Lord has done great things for them."

Then he comes back to reality in reflection and prayerfulness...but with the same confidence he began with...

*The Lord **has** done great things for us, and we will be filled with joy.*

Restore our fortunes and the fortunes of others, Lord, like streams in the Alice.

Those who have sown with tears will reap with songs of joy.

*Those who have gone out weeping, carrying seed to sow,
will return with songs of joy, carrying the harvest with them.*

As we sing our carols, which we have already committed to memory by singing them each year as festival songs like Psalm 126...let's make use of them. Let's have them on our lips but also in our hearts. Let's sing their deep truths of God's big salvation. Then let's live their truths in our lives, enacting the hope, kindness, goodwill and peacemaking we sing about as we give, offer hospitality, welcome friends and family and interact with strangers in our towns.

Sunday 17 December 2017

Let's celebrate that we have been blessed by the birth of Christ. Blessed not with possessions, clever theological answers or safe lives. Blessed because we are free from the cages of this world, increasingly free from the muck of this world, and we are being filled to overflowing with the fruit of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness, faithfulness and self-control. Blessed because we know the Lord who has brought his favour into our year and into our lives.

Let's sing with joy because we have good news that fills our hearts with hope like the shepherds out in the fields who heard the choir of angels, and then live with joy as we pass on the Lord's blessings to others, as wait for him to make all things new.

Let's **bring** joy to the world, not just sing about it. Then it will really be a merry Christmas.

Resources: Feasting on the Word Year B