

13 December 2020

Advent III: Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-end.

Robed in Christ, raising up the ruins

Last week we looked at 2 Peter 3 and its terrifying Advent threat: the world is ending soon, Jesus is coming back, so you'd better be ready. He's making a list, he's checking it twice! And it's not just *nice* that's he looking for. No, on that day you must be holy and without blemish. All disguises and evasions will be stripped away, and what is left had better be gold, or it will be consumed in fire. So far, so terrifying.

Except, as I went onto say, that demand – holy and without blemish – actually opens up the way to the Gospel. You see, if the demand was instead that you be very good, you might stand some chance of actually meeting it. If you tried very hard, you could be very good. It would be difficult, yes – and almost impossible not to become quite harsh on yourself and others for not trying hard enough – but yes, you could do it. You could be good.

But 'holy and without blemish' is just impossible. It means that if the most searching light was shone into every aspect of my life, into the very depths of my heart, that there would be nothing there, *nothing*, that was not how God wanted it. *Nothing* that was not love and grace and wisdom and beauty. Well, if that is what God demands, we're sunk. It is just not do-able.

Unless, of course, what God demands, He also gives. Unless what He demands, He also gives. And that's what the Cross is all about. As I said last week, when Jesus goes onto the Cross, he comes alongside human beings in all their death and misery and brokenness, and it's as if he casts Himself around them like a cloak. Everything wrong about us gets hidden, in everything right about Him. He is the One who is perfect love, grace, wisdom and beauty, and He covers us with Himself. And now when God looks at us, with that awesome demand – 'holy and without blemish' - He sees us only in Christ.

And I went further. It's a very strange kind of cloak that Christ throws over us, the cloak of his own rightness, because (I suggested) it not only covers us – but in the long run, actually changes us. What is first of all outside us, comes inside. There's a chilling verse in the Psalms that gives the right idea, though the Psalmist is actually talking about the other end of things, about evil. The wicked man, says the Psalmist, 'clothed himself with cursing as with a garment; it seeped into his body like water, and into his bones like oil.' (Ps.109:18). What begins as external behaviour gradually seeps in and corrodes the very essence of the person. And so it is with grace. Initially, Christ is outside us. He wraps Himself around us, as with a cloak, and then, over time He seeps into our bodies like water, and into our bones like oil. The outside becomes the inside. Christ around me, becomes Christ within me. It is a long, slow, arduous change but this is the Gospel: on the last day, when the Father comes looking for his holy and without blemish children, that is what He will find – in us. It's no longer just a matter of hiding inside Christ: it's more accurate to say we'll have become Christ. Or Christ will have become us.

If all this sounds simply too bizarre, think of what we're doing this morning: celebrating communion. Now, whatever idea we have of Jesus' presence in the bread, first of all he is real outside of you, and then you take Him into yourself. The outside becomes the inside. And because you receive the Body of Christ, you become the Body of Christ. Physically speaking, that bread becomes part of your body. Spiritually speaking, Christ's life feeds yours, becomes yours. Christ becomes you. That's why, incidentally, communion is so important: it really is how God remakes us. So please, if you're watching online and unable to come to church this Christmas, ask us, and either Maxine or I will bring you communion at home. It really is that central, that important.

You might be thinking – well, this is all last week’s sermon. What about today’s Bible readings? Well, actually, everything so far has been a sermon on Isaiah 61, with those marvellous words: ‘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.’ (Is.61:10) My whole being shall exult in my God: everything about me is going to leap for joy because at last, in Jesus, I shall be what I was meant to be. No more fear, no more misery, no more smallness: because his cloak is round me, everything about me will end in glory, everything about me will become glory.

Which all sounds very lovely, but does it have any practical relevance to your life at all? What are you actually meant to *do* about this, or is it just warm waffle?

That depends. Are the opening lines of Isaiah 61 waffle? What does the life look like that is robed in Christ, which is experiencing his love, wisdom and beauty seeping into its very bones? Well, says Isaiah, it looks like this: He 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 prisoner, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour, and the day of vengeance of our God. A life robed in Christ will be a blessing to all around it. In the prophet’s words, it shall build up the ancient ruins and raise up the former devastations.

Now here’s a challenging thought. That’s why God wants you to be a Christian. It’s why he wants you to be part of St. Lawrence. It’s not actually just, or even primarily, about *you* and what you think you need. It’s about the world. It’s about Abbots Langley. God wants a church here, he wants *you* here, to build up the ruins. To repair and renew human life wherever its been damaged here, in this place. However human life has been broken, through abuse, alcoholism, poverty, family breakdown, mental disorder – the list is legion – we’re here to be God’s way of making it right. That’s why he has covered us with his robe.

Not of course, we’ll never entirely solve these things. The Kingdom won’t come until the King does. However, it is our job to at least point to it - to prepare the way of the Lord, as John the Baptist might say. That’s why we do the Malawi Project. It’s why we support the Food Bank. It’s why we do the Sunday lunch club, and the bereavement visiting, and so much else.

Well, I say *we*, but is it? Really? I fear sometimes these things have become instead what a few individuals are passionate about. As a church we think it might be our job to applaud them, and probably give some money, but the projects themselves haven't soaked into our bones. They're not central, absolutely central, to our own personal lives, and our church's corporate life. We don't, collectively, think that mending the world in these specific ways is what being part of St. Lawrence is about. Perhaps with the Malawi Project we've come some way to realising that, which is fantastic. But here's the challenge: Malawi aside, what ready answer do we have to the question: what is this whole church doing to make Isaiah 61 a reality here, in this parish? How, collectively, are we all pulling together to bring good news to the oppressed and bind up the broken-hearted who live all around us? What do we do which prompts those outside to see and say – St. Lawrence's does something really good, really vital in our community. Thank God they're here. Truly, they are oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to reveal his glory.

The first half of 2021 offers us time to think and pray deeply about all this. By July, we need to have drawn up a new Mission Action Plan, a MAP. Every parish does it every few years, and the Bishop asks us to think about three main things: how we help people grow deeper into God, how we make new Christians, and – this morning's theme – how we transform the community around us. So what one or two things will we commit to doing which will make the Kingdom of God real here? Might it be doing more with the dying and bereaved? Might it be a real focus on mental health? Might it be working with teenagers, re-launching the Youth Club? What about climate change? Or something else entirely? We can't, of course, do them all. Better probably to choose one or two things, and do them really, really well.

Thinking about that, praying it over and deciding and then acting, and doing it all *together* – that will be our agenda for the New Year. For now, Isaiah 61: take it home, read it again and again and again, let it soak down deep into your heart. He has clothed us with his salvation: let our whole being exult, and let that joy flow into the world and raise up the ruins. Thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit.