

Advent 3
17/12/2017

Mark the Evangelist

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
Psalm 126
John 1:6-8, 19-28

The God who brings death and life

Good news to the oppressed, binding up of the broken-hearted, proclamation of liberty to the captives, release to the prisoners; a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit; the garments of salvation, a robe of righteousness, a garland, jewels...

The word of promise in this language is surely extraordinary in the ears of those who have lived through hell. Isaiah proclaims a great reversal, a turning upside-down of the experience of the people of God – the return of God to their midst as blessing.

But what about those for whom the world is not horrific, for whom life's biggest challenge is along the lines of negotiating a shopping centre carpark a few days before Christmas or waiting out a kitchen renovation? What does Isaiah have to say to any whose life is largely devoid of oppression or ashes or unrighteousness? Because, for *most* of us – in and out of the church – life *is* mostly ok most of the time, and so Isaiah's proclamation comes like icing on what was already a pretty good cake.

One way of hearing Isaiah under these circumstances is to imagine that he speaks not *to* us, but *as* us: "The spirit of the Lord is upon *me*," or us. The word to us becomes our own word and, going further, we take it upon ourselves not simply to speak of the coming of God but to be those who realise God's peace. We have received the Spirit, and we are to pay that forwards, for others.

Certainly, those who "have" are under a moral obligation to share and bless those who have not. But if this is all it's about, then there is no possibility that God has anything more to say to *us*. Is there a word of the Lord – a blessing, heart-raising word – for the relaxed and mostly comfortable?

The question of our redemption is not pressing today, either in the church or in society more generally. Certainly we are constantly working towards *something*, and something *better* than we what we presently know but this kind of progress is not the business of Christian worship or faith. The heart of our confession is not the offer of a *nudge* from worse to bad, or bad to good, or good to better. We speak, rather, of life out death, of the creation of something out of nothing. Christian faith is, at heart, concerned with miracles, with the impossible. For when God comes, what he brings is not only the kind of healing we *think* we need but also revelation of the *full extent* of that need. In the breadth of Isaiah's preaching God speaks such words of comfort as we read in worship this time of year, but also divine rage and accusation against the people for things about themselves they would scarcely recognise or be aware of.

When God comes, it is *always* as life out of death, as creation out of nothing. This means that when God comes it is always with bad news as well as with the good, the good *revealing* the bad. The broken-hearted may not *know*, or have acknowledged, that indeed their hopes have been dashed; the captives not know that they are imprisoned, the comfortable not know just how insecure they are.

We mark just this dynamic in our worship each week. We call on God, whether we are feeling we need God or not. We hear that we are forgiven, often of things we had not imagined we were guilty of. Perhaps quintessentially, we gather around a table at which is served a victim through whom salvation is somehow won.

All of this “works”, however, only to the extent that the bad comes with the good. If we speak of the coming of resurrection, we speak also about the coming of death. But we have to be careful here. The proclamation of resurrection is not for the *dying* but for the *dead*. We noted last week that we all know that we are dying. *This* knowledge, however – our mere mortality – is not the question answered by resurrection. Resurrection *reveals* death – a death we do not yet know – it does not merely nudge us through what we already know. Resurrection doesn’t answer our sense for death because we have not yet asked the question well enough, despite our mourning and ashes, as real as they are. The resurrection with which the church is concerned is that which identifies who *is* dead, including us dead who are still walking.

This is enacted also in the Eucharist. The Eucharist “works” only to the extent that we who receive the body and blood admit a culpability in its having been broken and spilt. There is no “nudge” here into a better life by taking a spiritual medicine which treats some disease in us, and so which could be substituted for a generic brand which is not called “body” and “blood”. The ritual kills in the accusation of our complicity in death, and raises in the creative grace of God. Death is but a means by which God can bless; the Eucharist is death and resurrection – Jesus’, and our own.

“The *spirit* of the *Lord* is upon me,” Isaiah proclaims, with the emphasis falling on the spirit, and not on the “me”. For it is the spirit of the Lord which creates and renews the face of the earth. This is the light John announced, which enlightens *everyone* (John 1.9), even those who do not yet know they are living in shadows. When God comes, the dark places appear and are flooded with light. And God is coming.

For this spirit, this light, all thanks be to God, Father, Son and Holy Spirit, now and always. Amen.
