

Isaiah 61:1-11

⁶¹The 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; ²to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³to 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. They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.

⁴They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations. ⁵Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines; ⁶but you shall be called priests of the LORD, you shall be named ministers of our God; you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations, and in their riches you shall glory. ⁷Because their shame was double, and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot, therefore they shall possess a double portion; everlasting joy shall be theirs. ⁸For I the LORD love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing; I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹Their descendants shall be known among the nations, and their offspring among the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.

¹⁰I 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, as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹For as the earth brings forth its shoots, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

John 1:6-8, 19-28

⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²²Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³He said, "I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, 'Make straight the way of the Lord,'" as the prophet Isaiah said. ²⁴Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah, nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

Address (Stephen Cotton)

Ruins have a fascination for us. Some of the most visited places in the world are ruins; the Colosseum in Rome, the Parthenon in Athens, Machu Picchu in Peru, the Pyramids of Egypt. We go to them precisely because they're places to make us think. What would it have been like to live here, and at that time? How did they build it? What were their names? Here at home English Heritage look after many places which make us think about the same questions. A couple of months ago we visited Rievaulx Abbey in pouring rain, and despite the weather it was moving to think of centuries of worship having taken place there.

I wanted to have the passage from Isaiah read this morning because I find it a very moving word from God to his people who were in need. The nation of Israel is in exile in Babylon and they understand that their homeland is a place of ruin and destruction. For them, the ruins of Jerusalem were not objects of fascination but of despair. These places were still important to them, representing their God and the ways in which they encountered Him. But for now, they were hopelessly out of reach.

Into this situation Isaiah speaks thrilling words of restoration and justice. If they are familiar it may be because Luke ch4 tells us that the beginning is what Jesus read from the scriptures in the synagogue at the start of his ministry. Isaiah goes on to say that those who mourn in Zion now will go on to raise up, to build up, to repair. God says to his people in despair, it will not always be like this. There will be restoration and re-creation.

Some of you will remember growing up in London or another city where bomb damage was still very evident. Newsreel footage of London, Coventry, Berlin or Warsaw from the 1940s is still shocking to us today, because in almost every place of devastation from World War II, creativity, determination and sheer hard work has meant that the ruins are no more. We are a creative species that loves to make and to restore and repair, and in doing so I believe we see something of the way in which we are made in the image of God. Isaiah's vision is one in which the response to ruin is gladness, praise, glory, healing, liberty, release, righteousness.

This theme from Isaiah and the appointed psalm for the day has led to this Sunday being "Gaudete Sunday". Gaudete is Latin for "Rejoice" and the first line of the traditional Introit for Mass on this Sunday is "Gaudete in Domino semper: iterum dico, Gaudete"- "Rejoice in the Lord always and again I say rejoice". Many churches from across the denominations will use a different coloured candle in the advent ring, or different vestments. What matters most is that we, in this time of Advent and its waiting, remember to rejoice.

Our Gospel reading today hasn't been forgotten. In it, we are invited to join in God's great restoration project. If you're somewhat impractical, like me, you may wish you had the skills to appear on the Repair Shop, or Homes under the Hammer. Or maybe you had such skills but you can't do it these days.

The coming of Jesus into the world is an invitation for us to identify with the project of the building of the Kingdom of God. Advent asks us not to mooch around gloomily contemplating what went wrong, nor to wait for others to come along and sort things out, but to prepare ourselves to join God's restoration business. "Thy Kingdom Come", we pray, and John the Baptist goes further and says "His Kingdom is Coming. What are you going to do about it?"

John invited one particular response from his listeners. If you want to be part of God's work, come and be baptised. Now, baptism was a familiar idea to the Jewish people. It symbolised a change of heart, a washing clean, a new direction, as it does for us. John said, "Repent and be baptised", making it quite clear. Turn around and face a different way is what repent really means.

But... baptism was for converts. If you came into Judaism from elsewhere, you'd be baptised into the faith, but if you were in a Jewish family, you wouldn't need it. Yes, you would still take part in cleansing and purifying rituals when you came to the temple, but baptism was something that marked out those coming into God's Kingdom from the outside, as they might have seen it.

No wonder John caused a stir.

So, today, the scriptures remind us that while part of Advent is waiting, part is about rejoicing. Rejoice because God wants to bring about the restoration of all things in the way that Isaiah gets

so excited about. Not only wants to, but will bring about that restoration. John tells us that at the end of our waiting, Jesus will bring in God's Kingdom in a new way, partially at his first coming, and completely at the end of time. If we want to be part of that Kingdom, we need only to come humbly, repentant and willing, and God will use us as partners in his business of restoration for the world. We don't come to be baptised this morning, but in this Sacrament, and in the season of Advent and Christmas as a whole, may we be sure to ask God to count us in to the new things he is doing.