

ViralStJames Bible Study #12: Advent – Looking Forward

The Background – Looking Forward

The Prophets – Isaiah

Readings from the book of Isaiah are a traditional part of the Advent story. Isaiah and the other prophets in the Old Testament were called to speak truth to power. They warned the Israelite kings and their fellow citizens that turning away from God, embracing idols and looking for foreign armies to deliver them from conquest was doomed to failure and would lead to judgement. However, along with warnings of judgement, they sounded notes of future hope. Exile would come, but after that, restoration by a God that never ceases loving. All of the Gospel writers found Isaiah pointing the way forward, with no fewer than three of them quoting from the book in their first chapter. Jesus himself announces his ministry in Luke's Gospel by reading from the prophet in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth.

The Passage - Isaiah 61:1-9 and Luke 4:14-21

Is. 61:1 The 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;
2 to proclaim the year of the LORD'S favor,
 and the day of vengeance of our God;
 to comfort all who mourn;
3 to 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.
4 They shall build up the ancient ruins,
 they shall raise up the former devastations;
 they shall repair the ruined cities,
 the devastations of many generations.

Is. 61:5 Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
 foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
6 but 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.
7 Because their shame was double,
 and dishonor was proclaimed as their lot,
 therefore they shall possess a double portion;
 everlasting joy shall be theirs.

Is. 61:8 For I the LORD love justice,
 I hate robbery and wrongdoing;

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I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
9 Their 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.

Luke 4:14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. ¹⁵ He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Luke 4:16 When he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, he went to the synagogue on the sabbath day, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written:

¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me
to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives
and recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.”

Luke 4:20 And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on him. ²¹ Then he began to say to them, “Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.”

The Questions

We often think of God as the same yesterday, today and forever. This passage from Isaiah illustrates the point. When first read, the Jews in exile would have taken comfort from it; when Jesus read the passage at Nazareth centuries later, the poor, the blind and the oppressed flocked to him. Even today, the words resonate and challenge us. This is because God’s message of good news doesn’t change – and the challenge remains the same – are we listening?

1. Where does this good news originate from? (Is 61:1; Luke 4:14)

- *In both passages, the speakers – Isaiah and Jesus – claim their words are from God, given them through the Spirit. This is not man-made ‘good news’ or political spin.*
- *In the nine lessons and carols, we start with Adam and Eve losing their place with God in the garden through turning away from him – now God is here offering restoration of that broken relationship.*

2. In Isaiah’s time, it would have been straightforward to identify those to whom the message was addressed – the broken nation returning from exile. Who does Jesus identify as the ones to whom his message was addressed? Who would we identify today as the ones he is speaking to? How do we communicate this message?

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- *Jesus identifies the poor; the prisoners; the blind, the oppressed as the ones to whom his message is addressed – who do we see as the equivalent today?*
- *We are entrusted with the good news – and need to keep in touch with God's Holy Spirit to follow his promptings;*
- *Through our work at the SJC, we may be able to help 'the poor' whilst those with other gifts may be able to go alongside and help 'bind up the broken hearted' (Is 61:1). The Spirit can equip each of us to find the role we are to play – but we need to be actively listening to what Jesus has to say.*

3. What do you think the good news is that Isaiah and Jesus proclaim? What do you think Jesus meant when he said 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing?'

- *Jesus was announcing that he was the anointed one (the Messiah) sent by God and it was his words that were setting people free, releasing them from oppression, if they would but listen to him – the problem was that they (the Jews) didn't (Luke 4:23-30). They were expecting a messiah that would deliver them from the political oppression of the Romans and create them as an independent nation – not one who would challenge their attitudes and behaviour.*
- *Jesus annoys them by pointing out that in the past, it had been gentiles that had been blessed by God, because they listened to the prophets. This infuriated his listeners as they wanted a messiah that was for Jews only – nationalism is not a new problem!*
- *The Good News is of God's love for his people and his desire to set them free from their own selfishness – but many then and today may not favour a message that is rooted in humility, selflessness and not power. Jesus challenges us all, both then and today.*

4. Those to whom the good news is preached in Isaiah are transformed (61:3). How does Isaiah describe this transformation? Who is behind this transformation? Take a moment to reflect on one thing that you can praise and thank God for this year.

- *A crown replaces ashes; the oil of gladness replaces mourning; a garment of praise replaces a spirit of despair. Instead of mourning and despairing at the absence of God, there is joy and gladness at his return.*
- *The Lord is behind the transformation – he is the planter, and his transformed people reflect his image. It is his action, not their own works, that puts things right.*

5. What is the purpose of God transforming his people in this manner?

- *To display his splendour in them (61:3)*
- *To be seen as distinctive by the other nations (v.9)*
- *To demonstrate to all nations, not just the Jews, what a people blessed by God act like (vv.9, 11)*

6. Do you think this calling to be a distinctive, transformed people applies to us now? If so, what does it look like today?

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- *We are made in God's image, and from Is 61:8, it is clear that acting justly is an important factor;*
- *The thrust of the passage is God showing mercy, being tender to his people, binding up the broken hearted – it is a vision of humility, of mercy, of comfort.*
- *It is not one of power-wielding might, or selfish exercise of power, but of recognition that we owe everything to God (cf this image to the one of King Herod in Matthew Chapter 2, seeking to eliminate any possible rivals to secure his position through his own power)*

7. In many ways and for many of us, 2020 has been a hard year with the pandemic and the realities of Brexit beginning to loom large. Perhaps some of us have experienced something of the mourning, grieving and despair that the Jews in Isaiah's time were clearly feeling. Advent is a season of looking forward. Is there anything in these two passages that helps you to look forward to 2021 with greater anticipation, hope and encouragement?

If you want to spend more time exploring the impact that the words of the prophet Isaiah had on Jesus's understanding of his ministry, spend a few minutes looking at Isaiah 55:1-7. For example, the call to the thirsty is directly echoed by Jesus in John 7:37, and is picked up in his words to the woman at the well in John 4 and in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew 5. There are several other points in this passage that are also picked up by Jesus in his preaching and teaching. Who knows what he said to the two disciples on the road to Emmaus where 'beginning with Moses and the Prophets, he explained to them what was said in all the scriptures concerning himself!'

Space for notes:
