

Sunday 17th December 2017

Advent 3

Purple



Collect

O Lord Jesus Christ, who at your first coming sent your messenger to prepare your way before you: grant that the ministers and stewards of your mysteries may likewise so prepare and make ready your way by turning the hearts of the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, that at your second coming to judge the world we may be found an acceptable people in your sight; for you are alive and reign with the Father in the unity of the Holy Spirit, one God, now and for ever. **Amen**

Isaiah 61:1-4 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Year of the LORD's Favour

61 ¹ The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me, because the LORD has anointed me to bring good news to the poor;^[a] he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound;^[b] ² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; ³ to grant to those who mourn in Zion—to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he may be glorified.^[c] 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. ⁸ For I the LORD love justice; I hate robbery and wrong;^[d] I will faithfully give them their recompense, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. ⁹ Their offspring shall be known among the nations, and their descendants in the midst of the peoples; all who see them shall acknowledge them, that they are an offspring the LORD has blessed. ¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD; my soul 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 like a priest with a beautiful headdress, and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels. ¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its sprouts, and as a garden causes what is sown in it to sprout up, so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to sprout up before all the nations.

Footnotes: a. or *afflicted*. b. or *the opening* [of the eyes] *to those who are blind*; Septuagint and *recovery of sight to the blind*. c. or *that he may display his beauty*. d. or *robbery with a burnt offering*.

COMMENT: God's justice was a constant theme of the great prophets of Israel. In these classical lines of Hebrew poetry, the unknown disciple of Isaiah, a prophet of Israel's exile in Babylon, applied this theme to the promised return to their homeland. Verses 1-4 declares the new mission in which Israel will engage. Not only would the ruined cities of Judea be rebuilt, but the ancient covenant between Israel and God would be renewed. The end result would be a whole new quality of life and purpose for God's people. They would serve as a herald of good news to oppressed and captive people, bringing assurance of God's favour and comfort to those who mourn. They would enable others to sing praises of joy. That theirs would be a missionary task becomes even clearer in the concluding segment (verses 8-11). The return from exile and renewal of the ancient covenant expressed God's justice, righteousness and salvation which the exiles descendants would make known to other nations. The imagery of a new wardrobe which Israel would wear, like that of a bridegroom and bride dressed for their wedding, described how they would be prepared for their new role. Their new clothes symbolised the divine gifts of a moral and spiritual nature. As if that is not enough to make the point, imagery of growth in a garden reiterated how God would prepare the new Israel "to spring forth before all the nations" (verse 11). According the Luke's Gospel (4:16-20), Jesus adopted the first verse of this passage as the basic theme for his ministry. Without question the apostolic church read it as a messianic prophecy. Some scholars have gone so far as to identify this poem with the Servant Songs, especially Isaiah 52:12-53:12. The eschatological significance of the message comes to the fore in the prophetic mission expressed in verse 2: "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

John 1:6-8, 19-28 English Standard Version (ESV)

The Testimony of John the Baptist

1 ⁶There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷He came as a witness, to bear witness about the light, that all might believe through him.

⁸He was not the light, but came to bear witness about the light.

¹⁹And this is the testimony of John, when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰He confessed, and did not deny, but confessed, "I am not the Christ." ²¹And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the Prophet?" And he answered, "No." ²²So they said to him, "Who are you? We need to give an answer to 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^[a] the way of the Lord,' as the prophet Isaiah said." ²⁴(Now they had been sent from the Pharisees.) ²⁵They asked him, "Then why are you baptising, if you are neither the Christ, nor Elijah, nor the Prophet?" ²⁶John answered them, "I baptise with water, but among you stands one you do not know, ²⁷even he who comes after me, the strap of whose sandal I am not worthy to untie."

²⁸These things took place in Bethany across the Jordan, where John was baptising.

Footnote: a. or *crying out*, *'In the wilderness make straight*.

COMMENT: The introductory paragraphs of John's Gospel takes us to the beginning of time using metaphors such as Logos (Word), life, light, glory and truth to describe God's full revelation in Jesus, the Word made flesh. The focus shifted immediately to John the Baptist and his ministry preparing the way for Jesus, the light of the world. These excerpts from John 1 deal exclusively with the role of the Baptist. The author of the gospel distinguished John the Baptist from Jesus as the one who is only a witness to the light. He set the stage for Jesus' appearance by reiterating this distinction when challenged by the religious leaders of Israel. Due to the domination of the whole eastern Mediterranean region, first by Hellenistic and then Roman imperial power, and the pervasive influence of the Greco-Roman culture, a plethora of Jewish eschatological writing had appeared in the late centuries before and first century after the time of Jesus. Jewish expectations of the Messiah reached a very intense level. Typical of religious authorities in all ages, the established priesthood challenged every new prophetic voice. John the Baptist was no exception (verses 18-22). The Jews did not expect the Messiah to come unannounced. At the end of the very last book of the Old Testament, the obscure prophet Malachi, of the early 5th century BC, we find a paragraph referring specifically to the prophet Elijah returning to prepare for "the great and terrible day of the Lord." Similarly, Deuteronomy 18:15 contained a reference to a prophet like Moses who would be raised to whom the people would give heed. Acts 3:22 and 7:37 show that the apostolic church believed that Jesus himself fulfilled the messianic promise. The early church, probably taking their clues from Jewish contemporaries, interpreted the eschatological "the day of the Lord" as referring to the coming of Jesus whom the church claimed to be the Messiah/Christ. Those who challenged John were said to be representatives of "the Pharisees" (verse 24). In other words, the identity of the opposition had moved from the general to the specific. The particular concern of the Pharisees was ritual purity and total adherence to the law of Moses. Jews did not need to be baptised because they were already "sons of the covenant." The forerunners of the Messiah would baptise only those who converted to the true faith and so became members of the elect people, Israel. Thus, John's ministry of preaching repentance leading to baptism was an insult to the Pharisees as if he was saying - become proper Jews!

Psalm 126 *In convertendo* Grail Psalter

℟ What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed we were glad.

¹ When the Lord delivered Zion from bondage,
it seemed like a dream.

² Then was our mouth filled with laughter,
on our lips there were songs. **℟**

The heathens themselves said: “What marvels the Lord worked for them!”

³ What marvels the Lord worked for us!

Indeed we were glad.

℟ What marvels the Lord worked for us! Indeed we were glad.

⁴ Deliver us, O Lord, from our bondage as streams in dry land.

⁵ Those who are sowing in tears will sing when they reap. **℟**

⁶ They go out, they go out, full of tears, carrying seed for the sowing; they come back, they come back, full of song, carrying their sheaves. **℟**

**Glory be to the Father and to the Son
and to the Holy Spirit,
As it was in the beginning, is now, and ever shall be,
world without end. Amen.**

COMMENT: This was another of the songs that might have been sung by pilgrims making their way up to the temple in Jerusalem. It celebrated Israel’s deliverance from the Babylonian captivity. The concluding prayer asked for God’s help in renewing the nation as the dry watercourses of the Negev desert and the reaping of an abundant harvest restored prosperity.

Short Preface

And now we give you thanks because you sent him to redeem us from sin and death and to make us inheritors of everlasting life; that when he shall come again in power and great triumph to judge the world, we may with joy behold his appearing, and in confidence may stand before him.

Post Communion

We give you thanks, O Lord, for these heavenly gifts; kindle in us the fire of your Spirit that when your Christ comes again we may shine as lights before his face; who is alive and reigns now and for ever. **Amen**

Blessing

Christ the Sun of Righteousness shine upon you, scatter the darkness from before your path, and make you ready to meet him when he comes in glory; and the blessing of God almighty, the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit, be among you, and remain with you always. **Amen.**