**Good News of HOPE**: Isaiah 61:1-4; 8-11. Sermon for St James by Sally Sutcliffe 13 December 2020

News News News. It’s everywhere. The Good, the Bad and the Ugly (or ‘Fake’). And because bad news travels fast it’s usually the doom and gloom that gets the limelight. The good so often goes unnoticed.

Even the Good News of Hope which Jesus brings at Christmas, and which is foretold throughout the Old Testament, is still in many ways ‘hidden in plain sight’. This was the turning point of history, a headliner of a story if ever there was one, but our society edits out its power in favour of a more palatable storyline involving a cute baby, furry animals and a starry starry night. In this amazing and prophetic passage from Isaiah, the hope for Israel is very concrete: the oppressive Exile will end, mourning and sadness will cease. Today we have the privilege of understanding this passage in hindsight (which is a wonderful thing!) seeing its fulfilment in Jesus. Recently Chris preached on the Luke 4 passage where Jesus reads from the scroll the very passage we’ve heard today and declares ‘today this scripture has come true in your hearing’. This must have blown the hearers’ minds. What effect does it have on us? Especially when we realise that Jesus has now passed the task of spreading this Good News on to *us* as Steve showed in his sermon last week from Isaiah 40. So, based on this passage in Isaiah 61, what *is* the Good News we are called to preach today?

**Proclaim good news to the poor.** The pandemic has suddenly increased poverty and debt across the world and further increased the gap between rich and poor. We are called to serve those in need, through the Foodbank, through organisations like CAP and other ways. Time and time again we see in both the Old and New Testaments that God has a ‘Bias to the Poor’. Not that the rich don’t matter. As with Black Lives Matter, it’s not that white lives don’t count. It’s that God notices when there is an imbalance of power and he is passionate about rectifying it. (‘It’s the poor I’m talking about right now’, I can imagine God saying, ‘so don’t deflect from what I’m saying by arguing the point!’) Through the Old Testament prophets and ultimately in Jesus He is constantly challenging our complacency. However, the Good News offered to the poor is also not sugar-coated. God doesn’t promise to turn them from rags to riches. But in Jesus the promise is solid: Paul tells the Philippians in chapter 4:19 ‘My God will meet all your needs, according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus’. In the Beatitudes in Matthew 5, Jesus expands ‘the poor’ to include ‘the poor in spirit for theirs is the Kingdom of heaven’. That sounds pretty Good News!

**Bind up the broken-hearted**. Psalm 147:3 says,‘He heals the broken-hearted and binds up their wounds.’ At the heart of Jesus’ ministry is compassion for the broken-hearted. He feels their pain, caring for his mother even when he is suffering on the cross, healing the sick and disturbed. Every time I go in the church garden, I am comforted by the verse engraved on the rock: ‘Cast all your anxiety on him, for he cares for you.’ (1 Peter 5:7). Covid has massively increased stress and distress in this already stressed-out world: can we share His compassion through a phonecall, a socially distanced chat with a neighbour, or an offer to pray?

**Proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners**. Both the real and the metaphorical darkness of the dark dank prison cell, no light, no hope. People can be imprisoned by the darkness of fear, despair, hopelessness, confusion, addiction. They can be released when the Light which reveals the truth of Christ shines warmly on them: ‘you will know the truth and the truth will set you free’ (John 8:32). Are there people on our hearts whom we can coax out into light and freedom?

**Proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.** Where have you been this past year, you say? How can you talk about ‘the year of the Lord’s favour?’ Well, maybe it’s a bit like Reverse Santa schemes, where people give instead of get presents. Have you noticed that the Good News of the Kingdom of God is Reverse Good News? It’s in giving that we receive, it’s in losing our life that we find it, it’s in letting go of control over our lives that we find peace. It’s in the midst of pain and suffering that we find Christ himself. As Steve reminded us in his sermon on the sheep and goats, Christ Himself is to be found in those who are hungry, thirsty, homeless, imprisoned. It is these who need releasing, and we are the ones to do it. So, if ever there was a year of the Lord’s favour, surely it is this one, where there is so much need and so many opportunities for His hope (or favour) to be shared. And hope in Christ is real hope, not wishful thinking. Verse 8 foreshadows Christ reconciling us to God through ‘an everlasting covenant’. So, this hope is real, present and eternal: ‘And hope does not disappoint us, because God has poured out His love into our hearts through the *Holy Spirit*, whom He has given us.’ (Romans 5:5). Actually, the greatest promise to us throughout the New Testament is not material gifts, but the gift of the Holy Spirit. It is His Holy Spirit we all desperately need above all things. This is Good News.

**Proclaim the day of vengeance of our God**. God embodies both mercy (favour) and justice (vengeance for evil). He is holy and pure and so cannot not punish evil. Verse 8: ‘For I, the Lord love justice. I hate robbery and wrongdoing.’ The context in Isaiah is that God will punish those who kept the Jewish people captive. Now in Christ mercy triumphs over judgement (James 2:13) and in Isaiah’s prophetic passage we catch a glimpse of the day when evil is conquered and men and women are reconciled to God through the death and resurrection of Christ. Finally, there is forgiveness for sin and a way back to God. This is amazingly Good News! Do you know someone who needs to hear this?

**Comfort all who mourn.**  We are all too aware of the many around the world who mourn loved ones at this time, those taken too early by Covid or other illnesses. Jesus cares. He weeps at the death of Lazarus. And here again there is a foreshadowing of Jesus’ words in the Beatitudes: ‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.’ As we have already seen, God’s kingdom is an upside down one: it’s the ones who suffer who are paradoxically blessed. These are the people who receive the blessing, these are the people for whom the Good News really *is*Good News. Can we, like Jesus, weep with those who weep? Not necessarily saying anything, but being there, alongside.

**Bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes** I love this picture, like in India where they throw flower garlands round visitors to welcome them, beautifying them. God loves making us beautiful, I have the picture of him gently lifting our bowed heads, throwing a garland of flowers round our neck and making us smile again. This will then turn into praise: a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. Whose neck will you throw a garland round this week?

So, all this is the Good News, and doesn’t the world need to hear it! But I noticed something fascinating when I read on in Luke 4 after Jesus declares He is the anointed one. He doesn’t just read it out, he also interprets it. And what he says infuriates his hearers. He says: ‘You’ll be expecting a miracle from me here among you then, to prove I really am the Anointed one, the Messiah. Well, I’m not going to oblige.’ (my paraphrase!) He explains that Elijah wasn’t sent to help the obviously needy widows in Israel, but a *foreign* widow, and the only leper healed in the time of Elisha was Naaman, a *Syrian*. Jesus isn’t going to perform a miracle for those who feel entitled to it. God does the opposite of the norm; He chooses those who are not obvious. He favours those who *don’t* feel worthy, don’t feel entitled, like the outsider, the foreigner, the insignificant one, the one ‘outside the camp’. The synagogue members receive this Good News as bad news and feel so snubbed that they chase Jesus out of the town and nearly push him off a cliff. Does God get *our* goat sometimes when He doesn’t do what we want? Don’t *I* have the right to be happy? Why did this happen? Why Coronavirus? Why did God heal *them* when He didn’t heal her/him/me? Do you really want me to share the Good News with *them*? He might say: ‘Yes, I do. That person you find difficult, the one you don’t understand, the one you pass by. Go to those on my heart; I’ll put them on your heart if you let me. I’ll show you who is hungry for me, who knows they need me, who is ready to hear the Good News of Hope that I bring. Pray for my Holy Spirit to show you.’

If we experience for ourselves this Good News and then share it with others, what will be the result?

‘They will rebuild the ancient ruins, renew the ruined cities.’ It’s those who have been released from oppression who will do this, not those who need no releasing. The words of a preacher Will and I heard 20 years ago have always stuck in our mind: ‘The extent to which the church welcomes the marginalised is the extent to which the prophetic voice will be heard in the church.’ When new Christians join us at St James (she says in faith!) are we prepared to let go of the reins and encourage *them* to lead in renewing the church?

We will ‘delight greatly in the Lord’, our soul will ‘rejoice in our God’ – see verse 10. We’ll know the true joy of salvation!

He will… Make righteousness and praise spring up before *all nations* (verse 11). In other words, the whole world will see the Kingdom coming on earth. It’s going to happen. It’s His will. He will make it happen. He is the soil, the garden, we are the seed he plants and it is He not us who causes the miracle of growth. We just need to stay in the soil, listen to His Spirit, do what he tells us to do, and it will happen.

Now Jesus, the anointed one, has passed the baton on to His body, the church on earth. The Spirit of the Lord is now on *us* to proclaim the Good News of hope to this generation, to those we hadn’t thought of, to those beyond our radar, to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour. Will we listen to the Spirit and obey?

***Notices*** *Discover HOPE together during Advent.*

*Ways to pass on HOPE –*

* *decorate your window on a Christmas theme (free resources: collect from the hall on Sat 12th 1.30-2.30pm or see Sarah)*
* *Collect a leaflet of HOPE (from church or from the box by the bus shelter on Bolton Road) and give it to a neighbour.*
* *Tie a ribbon of HOPE to a tree or railing in the church garden (collect a ribbon from the box by bus shelter).*

*Sunday 20th – ‘Unexpected HOPE’ (Luke 1:26-38;46-55) (Sadly. due to continuing restrictions, we will not have an evening Carol Service at church.)*

*Christmas Eve 6pm – our Christingle will be online this year. ’Bags of resources’ containing all you need to make a Christingle will be available at church on Sunday 20th 11.30-12.30. Then join in the ‘live’ service online on zoom.*

*Christmas Day 10am Holy Communion. (sorry no online service)*

*Sunday 27th Dec – Keep on walking in HOPE (1 John 1; & John 21:19b-end) Preacher: Jenny. Service led by Sally/Will. (sorry no online service).*

Between Christmas and New Year we will suspend Morning Prayer, Night Prayer and Zoom Bible Study.