

First Sunday after Christmas  
Saint Dunstan's Episcopal Church, Houston, TX  
27 December 2020

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

I find it very ironic that on the first Sunday after Christmas, the Lectionary Writers give us the passage of Isaiah 61 which follows the passage Jesus used as he began his public ministry in Capernaum, according to Luke 4: 16-19. On that occasion, Jesus stood up, read the passage:

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 broken-hearted,  
to proclaim liberty to the captives,  
and release to the prisoners;  
to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,  
and the day of vengeance of our God;  
to comfort all who mourn...

After reading the passage, Jesus made the most outstanding claim in human history. He says, "Today, this very day, here among you, these words have become a reality." This outrageous claim fills many Christians around the world with the same longing and expectation the Jewish people feel even today. To understand the Christian longing, let us understand the Jewish longing better.

Many theologians see Isaiah 61 as the voice of a different prophet, also given the name of Isaiah. They believe, Isaiah 1-39 were written by an author they call "Proto-Isaiah." Chapters 40-60 by a different author they call "Deutero-Isaiah," or Second Isaiah. And Chapters 61-66 by this "Trito" or Third Isaiah. If this division is true, then the first verses of the section Jesus used above, and the verses for today are this third prophet's introduction. He tells us something about his vocation. He says, "For Zion's sake I will not keep silent, and for Jerusalem's sake I will not rest, until her vindication shines out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch." This Isaiah will preach a message of vindication and blessing to a nation that has been engulfed by the darkness of captivity in Babylon. At a time when they had lost their hope, he stands as God's messenger to preach a message of blessing. God has sent him to announce, "good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to

the captives, to announce release to the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor." This is his vocation. He will be God's mouthpiece, and, like Jesus, he makes several extraordinary claims:

1. The Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.
2. Jerusalem's vindication will shine out like the dawn, and her salvation like a burning torch.
3. The nations themselves will see the vindication of the city, and all the kings of the nations will see her glory.
4. This vindication will be so profound that God himself will give the city a new name.
5. Jerusalem will be a crown of beauty in the hand of the LORD, and a royal diadem in the hand of your God.

After the captivity in Babylon, some of the people of God went back home to the Promised Land, but the vindication of Jerusalem never became a reality, God's salvation still waited for a future time, and the nations did not see Jerusalem's glory. The new name promised by God never became a reality. In fact, the nation was a shadow of their former days. Their temple was an insignificant structure by comparison to the Solomon's Temple, their city was in ruins and it took centuries to rebuild, and their streets were still filled with the brokenhearted, poor, captive, homeless, and sick.

At some point, the nation began to wonder, "What happened to God's promises? What happened to the justice, peace, and prosperity Isaiah announced? Why hasn't the city been vindicated? We are still oppressed, enslaved, and groaning under the yoke of the nations. Has God changed his mind? Is God a liar?" The answers to these questions gave rise to a spiritual renewal during the second temple period, a renewal that saw the birth of the Pharisee movement. The people began to realize that the promises had not yet been fulfilled. They then began to place all these promises as belonging to the time of Messiah. When Messiah comes, the prophets will be fulfilled, and the vindication of Israel will become a reality. The Jewish people still hold on to these promises. When Messiah comes, he will make all things right and Jerusalem will be vindicated. This is a promise that fills them with longing. "Wouldn't today be a nice day for Messiah to come?" This is not just a famous line from Fiddler on the Roof. This is

also Israel's most fervent prayer. Messiah will come and with him the final restoration of God's Zion.

Now, let us talk about Jesus. As we were getting ready for Christmas during the Advent season, many of our readings and collects looked not just at the annual visitation of Christmas, but to the return of the Messiah. Jesus' statement that Isaiah's prophecies were fulfilled in him, remains an aspirational statement that points to his return. The kingdom has come to dwell among us, but although those promises of the kingdom have been initiated, they haven't become a full reality. The kingdom is here and yet, in a very real way, the kingdom is yet to come. The baby has been born and we celebrate the dawning of salvation, but we are still walking through the shadows of death. We are still groaning under the weight of sin. We still live in a world filled with injustice and suffering.

Some of us Christians still pray fervently for the return of Jesus. We long for a world filled with the peace that only God can give us. We have had a foretaste of his kingdom, but we want the full reality to come among us. "Come, Lord Jesus!" is our most fervent prayer. "Come and make us whole. Come and right all the injustices of the world. Come and lead us to your kingdom, where your will is always done, and where there are no tears, no suffering, and no injustice."

So, today, as we celebrate the coming of Jesus and give thanks to God for not leaving us orphaned, we also pray for his return. And we pledge to engage in kingdom building until he comes back to us. We pledge to carry the torch of salvation to the ends of the world and to work for a more equitable and just society. We pray for his return, but we also pledge to be his arms and his feet, bringing healing and restoration to brokenhearted people in our world.

May the newborn Christ bless you during the new year, and may our Lord's return find us busy building his kingdom of love and peace. Amen!