

Sunday 13th December 2020 – Third Sunday of Advent



*The reflection this week is provided by
Revd Michael Camp.*

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11

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;
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.

For 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

There 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. ⁹The true light, which enlightens everyone, was coming into the world.

This 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."^[a] 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,^[b] 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.

"Follow the yellow brick road; follow the yellow brick road, follow, follow, follow, follow, follow the yellow brick road" So sing the munchkins as they set Dorothy (and Toto!) off on the road to Oz. That metaphor of the path is something that seems to resonate deep down within us and it appears in one form or another in a million

stories. Its also become quite fashionable in press reports recently. The Covid vaccine is said to offer us a path out of the pandemic and back to normal living. We can now see the path that will lead us back to the daylight. In other news, Can we see a path to a Brexit deal? Can Donald trump see a path back to the White House?

The idea of a journey is a powerful metaphor but the idea of getting lost on a journey and not seeing the path ahead is even more powerful.

In today's Gospel reading we find John the Baptist being questioned by the Priests "Who are you?" they ask. John says that he is the voice of one crying in the wilderness; crying "Prepare the

way of the LORD, make straight in the desert a highway for our God.” Or to put it another way – humanity is lost in a forest. Let me show you the path out; the yellow brick road.

But where to? What is the goal of humanity’s journey? The prophet Isaiah sets out a vision: good news for the oppressed; liberty for captives; binding up broken hearts; gladness instead of mourning; praise instead of a faint spirit; building up ancient ruins; love for justice and hatred of wrongdoing; righteousness and praise springing up; the year of the Lord’s favour. What a conclusion to the journey!

The message of the Gospels is that in Jesus we can see all those things actually happening already. Liberty, gladness, justice, righteousness and praise. An end to mourning and wrongdoing and imprisonment. In Jesus God has brought all those things about and that’s why we celebrate on this “Gaudete” (rejoice) Sunday.

Isaiah’s vision can’t really be said to be the day to day experience of people in the world as it is though, can it? Not yet! We still await God’s final decisive action and in the meantime our task is still to prepare his way as John the Baptist did.

We do that in three ways: 1) Repent, turn away from the self centredness that disfigures our world; 2) embrace thankfully the love of God which forgives us and 3) pray for the strength of God’s Holy Spirit to make us more Christlike. Those three steps; repentance; embracing God’s loving forgiveness and prayer for strength are our yellow brick road; they are humanity’s path out of the pandemic of sin and selfishness and they are what we Christians have to offer to the world. If the thought of liberty and justice and comfort and righteousness really do make you rejoice today then let’s get on that road and make the path to it straight and visible.

Hymn Reflection from Malcolm Sturgess.

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord: keep watch, take heart!

This is instantly recognisable as a Taizé chant, from the Community in eastern France. Copyrighted in 1991, it is a comparatively recent addition to their oeuvre and is not in any of my five Taizé books, which were published earlier. There are nine verses in the psalms and three other OT sources for the words.

Most English churches do not do the Taizé chants justice. They are designed to be instantly accessible to all the mostly young people who gather at the Community from all over the world, but they should be sung in harmony by everybody. They are simplicity itself in both the words and the music. But not banality, which is the property we tend to give it.

Almost all the chants should include solo lines of singing for a cantor, and a variety of instrumental lines, which go with the basic chant and can make it very beautiful. Any community is likely to have one or two individuals, like our Julian, and maybe a violinist or a flautist, who can supply the extra bits. The arrangements of *Ubi caritas* (the most popular chant) cover eight pages in my book. *Wait for the Lord*, in our own NHWS (brown book), contains ten verses for cantor and a four-note chant to be hummed (or, at a pinch, played) as an accompaniment. We could easily do that! There are some instrumental lines in a thing called a Flexscore, but I have not seen them. Listen to three different versions on YouTube (which all have attractive graphics as well).

Verses for cantor (all to slightly different tunes)

1. Prepare the way for the Lord. Make a straight path for him.
2. The glory of the Lord shall be revealed.
3. All the earth will see the Lord.
4. Rejoice in the Lord always: he is at hand.
5. Seek first the kingdom of God; seek and ye shall find.
6. Joy and gladness for all who seek the Lord.
7. I waited for the Lord: he heard my cry.
8. Our eyes are fixed on the Lord our God.
9. O Lord, show us your way. Guide us in your truth.
10. Prepare the way of the Lord.

Wait for the Lord, whose day is near.
Wait for the Lord: keep watch, take heart!