

Nigel Rode : Sermon 14th December 2014

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11 Thessalonians 5:16-24 John 1:6-8, 19-28

There is a shop in Oxford that sells T shirts with printed messages, such as “God loves everyone” then in smaller print ‘but I’m his favourite’.

Another – that may be a reference to this time of year when we pull out the Christmas decorations again and set up the crib scenes says “I have found Jesus – he was down the back of the sofa all the time”.

And one that is very appropriate to this time of Advent says
“Jesus is Coming – look busy”

I guess that printed T shirts were not around at the time the prophet wrote the text this morning from Isaiah, but just think we could have had a whole wardrobe :

“ The Spirit of the Lord is upon me – because the Lord has anointed me”

“The Lord has sent me to bring good news to the poor” or

“Give them a garland – instead of ashes”

But I jest! – For in this passage the prophet is promising to those recently returned from exile in Babylon, that if they are righteous and not following pagan ways, God’s long promised, glorious deliverance of Israel is soon to be realised; the shame and sorrow of the recent past will be replaced with eternal joy and prosperity.

The prophet announces that God has commissioned him, through an anointing with the spirit, to bring good news to the oppressed, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. He spoke about comforting those who mourn and rebuilding the ruins of their lives. They will be clothed in garments of salvation and wear robes of righteousness.

His was a voice of hope, as was the voice of Mary who proclaimed the greatness of the Lord. She spoke of the one who shows favour to the lowly, offers mercy and lends the strength of his arm. He fills the hungry with good things and comes to the help of his people.

John too was a voice, the voice in the wilderness. He was a witness sent from God to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. He was to prepare the way for the coming of another, the true light that enlightens everyone.

The Pharisees, the religious authority, wanted to learn about this strange fellow who was announcing a message from God, and so sent the priests and Levites to interrogate him.

“Who are you?” they ask John. “Are you Elijah?” “Are you THE prophet?” These questions will have been because for centuries the Jews had read and learned that the great prophet, Elijah, would return before the great and terrible ‘day of the Lord’ (as written in Malachi 4.5). Elijah, it seemed, hadn’t died in the ordinary way, but had been taken up to heaven directly (2 Kings 2) and many believed he would return to herald God’s new day.

John answered ‘No. I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. “Make straight the way of the Lord” as the prophet Isaiah said.’

The interrogators persisted by saying if you are not the Messiah or the prophet then why are you baptising? To which John replied saying that the ‘one who comes after me stands among you now, but you do not know him’ adding with great humility ‘I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal.’

John, Mary and Isaiah. Each one a voice, a witness of hope. They each testify to a life and presence beyond their own. Hope doesn’t make life easy; it makes life possible. Hope reminds us that it won’t always be like this. There is light and life coming to us. It is already here among us, but the interrogators of the world make it difficult to hear that other voice, the witness of hope. The interrogators clamour and compete for our attention. They often speak the loudest but the voice of hope has never been silenced.

Hope is not easy and it needs constant practice. As St Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, it means we rejoice always, we pray without ceasing, we give thanks in all circumstances. These practices enable us to both hear and become the voice of hope.

Interrogators will look at the circumstances of rejoicing, praying and giving thanks and question as to whether there is a reason for those things. They want justification and reason, but witnesses look beyond the circumstances to the God who fills these circumstances. That is hope. It opens our eyes to see the one who is coming. It prepares our hearts to welcome the one who is already among us. It makes straight the way of the Lord. Hope is not a feeling but an orientation and attitude of our life. It is a way of seeing that allows us to recognise and know Christ, already here and not yet here.

Hope does not change the circumstances of our life; it changes us and that changes everything. we don’t need T shirts to remind us..... Just constant practice and pray without ceasing!

Amen.