

Witness to the Light: Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-12 John 1: 6-8, 19-28
A Sermon by Rev Phil Wootton for Advent 3: Sunday 13/12/20

‘They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the Lord, for the display of God’s splendour.’ This beautiful verse from Isaiah was on the dedication stone of the church I belonged to before I was ordained. This was in Gillingham, Kent; the church, St Paul’s, Parkwood. Parkwood, before it became a housing estate, had been woodland and orchard – hence the arboreal reference in the dedication. But Isaiah’s words meant more – something of a vision statement. It was a brand-new church building – previously we had met in a school hall. But roots go deep: like an ancient oak tree, we were part of the Christian church established in Kent by St Augustine in 597AD, now called to be a spiritual landmark in a new community. And we were ‘a planting of the Lord’: for all our efforts in planning and fundraising for the building, we owed our life and growth to God. To be ‘Oaks of righteousness’ meant not self-righteous or aloof, but sharing God’s passion for right and just relationships in human affairs and divine. If we got it right, our church would be for ‘the Lord’s splendour’: how others see God represented, not just through a building of bricks and mortar, but a people living in righteousness, standing out like a great oak tree.

Today’s Gospel: ‘There came a man from God whose name was John. He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that through him all people might believe.’ All four of the Gospels introduce Jesus through John the Baptist. Last week we heard from St Mark; this week from St John. All four Gospels present him as the ‘forerunner’ to the Messiah, as prophesied by Isaiah – a man from the wilderness heralding his coming. All four say John directed attention away from himself towards Jesus. ‘Don’t look at me. Look at the One who comes after me.’ John says, ‘I am not fit even to stoop down and untie his sandals.’ Now that’s a very strong statement. In the culture of the day, a student was expected to do any service at all for their teacher, short of stooping to help them off with their shoes – that was just too demeaning. John says, compared with Jesus, I’m not even good enough for that.

Now, we may imagine that statement as a bit of English false-modesty: put yourself down in the hope of a complement in return. And I quite like the idea of a John the Baptist who’s diffident and self-effacing; a John who doesn’t like to make a fuss. Unfortunately, although comforting to those of us who prefer to avoid attention, it’s not true. John is dramatic and in your face. Appropriately for the Baptist, he does everything with a splash! He cultivates the rough and rugged image of a prophet like Elijah or Elisha. He’s imaginable as having the preaching voice of Brian Blessed and the shepherding technique of a lion tamer. His razer-sharp tongue is directed against all who come to gaup – whether common folk or religious leaders, tax-collectors, soldiers, or even kings! When he said he was just a witness to the coming One, it was not as an observer but an activist, a campaigner for righteousness. And if we are to follow his example, to shine not with our own light but with Christ’s, we should do so with acts of righteousness and words of courage, through which we may display the splendour of the Lord.

‘He sent me to preach good news to the poor, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom to the captive, and release from darkness for the prisoners.’ Jesus quoted words from Isaiah we heard this morning, right at the start of his ministry. Effectively, he was laying down his agenda for the next three years. It’s a mammoth undertaking, involving a vast range of spiritual, emotional and physical needs. But remember how Jesus went about it – not actually with a big sweeping programme, but in small scale personal acts. Individuals were healed, a crowd was fed, a family received back their dead child. It was in the small, the local, the personal that Christ brought his light to the world.

In our times, this most difficult year has shown up so many fault lines in our society – issues of racial justice, gender-based violence, child poverty, mental health, inequality, and many more. More than ever, we know the need for Christ’s transforming power to come. More than ever, we want to be part of that transformation. Indeed, the church is under great pressure to show itself to be making a difference. But our actions feel small and futile – nothing to write home about. Actually, they are significant: every phone call made to someone who’s downcast; every connection we make that reduces loneliness; every prayer spoken – all are part of the church’s contribution to society. More importantly, it’s through them we testify to the light of Christ.

Don’t play down the importance of supporting charities either. Charities, especially those with a Christian foundation (like Christian Aid, where the name’s in the title; and the Children’s Society, which used to call itself ‘Church of England’) do the work of the church on behalf of us all in specialist areas. They proclaim the good news to the poor, freedom to the captives, binding up the broken. It matters we engage and promote them: it’s to the display of the Lord’s splendour.

One thing only the church provides is worship. In Isaiah, the Lord promises: ‘I will give you a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.’ The garment in question is a cloak, or rap – something that covers you completely, head to foot. It’s how you will be seen by others, how you present yourself to others. Wearing ‘praise’ as your costume doesn’t mean having to wear a cheesy grin all the time or whistling hymn tunes all day long, but at a time when so many are fed up – and quite honestly, not without reason – it’s about not letting despair get a foot hold. And to do that you have to look outside yourself and your own circumstances. Praise means lifting your eyes to the God who made us all and loves us all and promises to be with us all through thick and thin. Isaiah takes the picture further: the garments of praise are not any old garments. These are your wedding clothes, indeed, the bride’s dress, the groom’s morning suit, the very best you’ve got, designed to catch the eye. The garment of praise is truly a display of the Lord’s splendour. People can’t help but notice!

The call of the Christian, and of the church, at this time, is neither to shrink away nor to boast, but through the mindset that comes through praise and worship, to embrace opportunity and to engage with transformation, and so to bear witness to the light that is coming into the world.