

Sermon for Morning Prayer The Fourth Sunday after the Epiphany

Lessons:

The First Lesson: Here beginneth the sixty-first Chapter of the Book of the Prophet Isaiah.

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; To appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.

“And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. And strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers. But ye shall be named the Priests of the LORD; men shall call you the Ministers of our God: ye shall eat the riches of the Gentiles, and in their glory shall ye boast yourselves.

“For your shame ye shall have double; and for confusion they shall rejoice in their portion: therefore in their land they shall possess the double: everlasting joy shall be unto them. For I the LORD love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering; and I will direct their work in truth, and I will make an everlasting covenant with them. And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their offspring among the people: all that see them shall acknowledge them, that they are the seed which the Lord hath blessed. I will greatly rejoice in the LORD, my soul shall be joyful in my God; for he hath clothed me with the garments of salvation, he hath covered me with the robe of righteousness, as a bridegroom decketh himself with ornaments, and as a bride adorneth herself with her jewels. For as the earth bringeth forth her bud, and as the garden causeth the things that are sown in it to spring forth; so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise to spring forth before all the nations.”

Here endeth the First Lesson.

The Second Lesson: Here beginneth the sixteenth Verse of the fourth Chapter of the Gospel According to St. Luke.

“And he came to Nazareth, where he had been brought up: and, as his custom was, he went into the synagogue on the sabbath day, and stood up for to read. And there was delivered unto him the book of the prophet Esaias4 [**Ee-ZAY-uss**]. And when he had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears. And all bare him witness, and wondered at the gracious words which proceeded out of his mouth. And they said, Is not this Joseph’s son? And he said unto them, Ye will surely say unto me this proverb, Physician, heal thyself: whatsoever we have heard done in Capernaum, do also here in thy country. And he said, Verily I say unto you, No prophet is accepted in his own country. But I tell you of a truth, many widows were in Israel in the days of Elias [**Ee-LYE-uss**], when the heaven was shut up three years and six months, when great famine was throughout all the land; But unto none of them was Elias [**Ee-LYE-uss**] sent, save unto Sarepta [**ZAR-epp-tah**], a city of Sidon [**SYE-dunn**], unto a woman that was a widow. And many lepers were in Israel in the time of Eliseus7 [**Ee-LYE-zoose**] the prophet; and none of them was cleansed, saving Naaman [**NEH-ah-mon**] the Syrian. And all they in the synagogue, when they heard these things, were filled with wrath, And rose up, and thrust him out of the city, and led him unto the brow of the hill whereon their city was built, that they might cast him down headlong. But he passing through the midst of them went his way, And came down to Capernaum [**Kah-PURR-nah-umm**], a city of Galilee, and taught them on the sabbath days. And they were astonished at his doctrine: for his word was with power.”

Here endeth the Second Lesson.

Text:

From the Second Lesson: “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.” In the Name of the Father, and of the † Son, and of the Holy Ghost. *Amen.*

Introduction:

St. Luke recounts an episode that took place near the beginning of Our Lord’s earthly ministry, when He went to the synagogue in which He had been brought up from a boy and took His turn to read from the scriptures and expound them. The portion from the prophets that was appointed that day was the sixty-first Chapter of Isaiah, which is our First Lesson today, and Jesus took this occasion to announce that God had fulfilled the Old Testament prophecies in His person.

This particular portion of Isaiah follows on that which was read at Morning Prayer last week, when Isaiah dealt with the significance of the Israelites’ return to Palestine from their exile in Babylon. This next section, which we have this morning, promises the restoration and renewal of the Jewish nation in its recovered homeland. However, as Our Lord showed in His exposition to the Nazarenes, this promise was not merely about the political, cultural and economic improvement of the Jews in the Fifth Century before Christ. Instead, while it does indeed foretell that sort of worldly national renaissance, it is also a *type* or scriptural preview, of the spiritual renaissance that would come with the birth of Christ, the renewal of the Covenant of the Law as a Covenant of Grace, and the establishment of the Christian Church as the New Israel.

Theme:

Instead, while the Lord’s promise as reported by Isaiah does indeed foretell that sort of worldly national renaissance, it is also a *type* or scriptural preview, of the spiritual renaissance that would come with the birth of Christ, the renewal of the Covenant of the Law as a Covenant of Grace, and the establishment of the Christian Church as the New Israel.

Development:

- 1. Isaiah preached to the Israelites a message that was not Isaiah’s personal message but was the message the Lord God had given him to transmit to them.**

Isaiah wrote: “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me; because the Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek....” Note the implications of those assertions:

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me”, that is, Isaiah’s utterances are inspired by God. “[T]he Lord hath anointed me to preach good tidings to the meek...”, that is, the words Isaiah utters are authorized by God and his ministry of prophecy is God’s chosen work for him, not his own

chosen career.

We regularly see God giving the Old Testament prophets both their commissions to prophecy in His Name and the words they are to say on His behalf. Thus Ezekiel was filled with both the Spirit and with the Lord’s words, Jonah was told by the Lord what he was to say to the Ninevites.

Similarly Haggai and Zechariah, among others, were given the messages they were charged to deliver. And who can forget how the Lord caused Jeremiah, literally to be born to be His prophet, and then physically placed His words into the mouth of Jeremiah?

Thus one of the major benefits that God bestows on His people is to provide them with care and guidance, not least in the form of trustworthy prophecy or “forthtelling”.

2. The message the Lord gave Isaiah to transmit to the Israelites is a message of comfort, healing, freedom and, above all, of the Lord’s sovereign judgement upon humankind.

“[T]he Lord God ... hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound; To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of vengeance of our God....” “The acceptable year of the Lord” appears to be a reference to the “little jubilee” that Leviticus decreed should occur every seven years between the major Jubilees that were celebrated every fifty years, accompanied by the cancellation of debts and the freeing of bondservants.

Isaiah sets out the opening up and out of personal and social limitations that God will confer on men and women but reminds them that behind all their relations with the Lord, at the end of time, will come God's Judgement upon them and their conduct.

And, as always in these passages from Isaiah, the freedoms the prophet promises to the Israelites are not only promises of secular benefits to come but are also *types*, or scriptural previews, of the spiritual freeing that would come with God's revelation of Himself in the Incarnation of Christ.

3. Whether read as a present promise made to the ancient Jews or as a promise made to all mankind in Christ, Isaiah's message is one of healing, of restitution, and of God's concern that we, His people, should constantly grow in righteousness.

“[T]he Lord God ... hath sent me ... unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he might be glorified.”

God's principal way of giving us the means of growing in righteousness was to send to us His Son in human form. As St. Luke tells us in today's Second Lesson:

“...And when [Jesus] had opened the book, he found the place where it was written, The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he hath anointed me to preach the gospel to the poor; he hath sent me to heal the brokenhearted, to preach deliverance to the captives, and recovering of sight to the blind, to set at liberty them that are bruised, To preach the acceptable year of the Lord. And he closed the book, and he gave it again to the minister, and sat down. And the eyes of all them that were in the synagogue were fastened on him. And he began to say unto them, This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.”

Although it would take some of them three years to discover just what He meant by the statement, “This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears”, at that moment He was announcing His Messiahship. He is the One Who came to heal up the brokenhearted, free the captives, and bring joy to those who mourn.

Conclusion:

We who are members of the Church are the New Israel, the people of the New Covenant. Furthermore, that Church is the Body of Christ, Our Lord's chosen means of making Himself present in the world in this time after His Ascension and prior to His Coming again in Judgement. This is a wonderful gift to us from God. That gift, however, entails certain responsibilities, certain obligations. The two most important, and most difficult, of these are:

We owe God our utmost thanks for His gift, thanks which we can only show by always struggling to be, and to live as, the sort of people who have been so specially blessed by God; and

We are the ones who, as Christ's Body, must bring to the rest of the world "good tidings unto the meek" and "to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives....,

To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord". If we do not do this, no one will do it, and then no one will "give them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness...."

So I ask you: are we, through sloth and inaction, guilty of keeping this joyful message from those God intended to receive it, or are we doing everything in our power to spread it as far as it possibly can go?

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The Rev'd Canon John A. Hollister
February 1, 2009.

1 *Psalms and Lessons for the Christian Year* (1943), THE BOOK OF COMMON PRAYER x (PECUSA 1928, rev. 1943).

2 Isaiah 61:1-11 (KJV).

3 St. Luke 4:16-32 (KJV).

4 Isaiah (RSV).

5 Elijah (RSV).

6 Zarephath (RSV).

7 Elisha (RSV).

8 St. Luke 4: 21b (KJV).

9 Isaiah 61:1a (KJV).

10 Ezekiel 2:2 and 3:1.

11 Jonah 3:2.

12 Haggai 1:1b-2.

13 Zechariah 1:1-3.

14 Jeremiah 1:5.

15 Jeremiah 1:9.

16 Scriptural prophecy is primarily a matter of “forthtelling”, or the pronouncement of present truths, rather than “foretelling” or the prediction of future events.

17 Isaiah 61:1-2a (KJV).

18 Leviticus 25:9.

19 Isaiah 61:1-3 (KJV).

20 St. Luke 4:17a-21 (KJV).

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