

**'Recovery, Transformation, Resurrection, God will come!'**

**Advent 3, Baptism and Holy Communion, December 11<sup>th</sup> 2016.**

**Main passage Isaiah 35. also Matthew 11:2-11.**

Prayer:

May these spoken words be faithful to the written Word and lead us to the Living Word your Son our Saviour Jesus Christ.

Amen.

What words would you describe the ministry of Jesus?

*Pause...*

Transformative? Healing? Miraculous? Freedom? Redemption?  
Good news?

It is important for example, as we celebrate a baptism, for many here have committed themselves this year and past years to their children and godchildren, what images of Jesus will we communicate to the children?

In one of the Dead Sea Scrolls – (reference is number 521 of Cave 4) - there is a description of what the Messiah, would be, a description which looks to Isaiah 35. The Messiah would “free prisoners, giving sight to the blind, straightening out the twisted... and he will heal the wounded and make the dead live, he will proclaim good news to the meek, give to the needy, lead the exile and enrich the hungry.” These scrolls date from 1st century BC. It is likely that these ideas were clearly in the air and thinking of many people in the days of Jesus – the thinking that

when the Messiah comes, there will healing and restoration as Isaiah promised...

Isaiah 35 – looking more closely as we focus mostly on Old Testament texts in the coming months.

It is a beautiful poem. Creation is described – how the desert and parched land will be glad, the wilderness will rejoice and blossom...how the glory of Lebanon, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon will be given to it. Two chapters before, Isaiah 33, Isaiah describes the state of Judah *“the highways are deserted, no travellers on the roads ... the land dries up and wastes away.”* That is how it was. And yet the land will be glad, it will rejoice and blossom and glory and splendour given to it. This is more than simply the effect of spring rains – like we see on those amazing nature programmes where they use time capture techniques so we see with David Attenborough etc, in 10 seconds what happens in days weeks etc of rain.

It says that the glory of Lebanon the splendour of Carmel and Sharon will be given. These areas themselves had been devastated (see Isaiah 33) but they would be restored to their former glory. And the desert area and wilderness areas would then become as glorious as those regions. Lebanon was known for its beautiful forests of cedar trees, Carmel near the sea, known for its vineyards, lush pasture lands. And Sharon was one of the most fertile valleys in Israel. The desert and wilderness areas of Judah will become like these fertile areas. It is a wonderful beautiful image of recovery, of areas devastated restored, of transformation, and resurrection, from death to life from areas that were ‘dead’ into areas of ‘abundant life.’

Hold that idea – Isaiah reveals to us a God who brings recovery, brings transformation, brings resurrection... And this God will come, the land will see the glory and splendour of the Lord. So not just recovery, not just transformation, not just resurrection, but the Lord will come... the God up there becomes the God down here...

This promise is given to ‘strengthen the feeble hands, steady knees that give way’ – I’ve led a number of weddings, where the groom is the cool guy, ready for the big moment. But I’ve met some grooms, where that role of the best man was to keep the groom from running away! *But seriously* I’ve seen the best man do a great ministry, to help strengthen to steady those knees, to say to those with fearful hearts - be strong do not fear! Because of *what* will come, of *who* will come, of *what* will be!

Now here, the promise – recovery, transformation, resurrection, God will come – it is strengthen the believers who hear this. They fear what is to come in their lifetime – Isaiah 36-39 shows the struggles that Hezekiah was to face so there were real clear and present dangers to them as believers. But the promise was to strengthen so they would be strong and not fear.

Like the promises that Hannah and Stuart, and Richard and Laura via Skype make in our approaching baptism. They will seek to bring up Edith, as they have promised for Cecily and Leo – to bring them up in the Christian faith, they will pray, they will seek to educate, they will model, they will walk with them in the way of faith, but also they will seek to strengthen Edith, when she spiritually wobbles,(for we all wobble at sometime), to bring her to the promises of God, and of who he is and what he said he will do...And actually in Hebrews, the writer, uses very similar

words of encouragement. In chapter 12, he writes of discipleship and he knows it can be hard for Christians and he says: “Therefore strengthen your feeble arms, and weak knees.” We need encouragement then as in Isaiah’s day – and how does the Hebrews writer begin that chapter: *“And let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us, fixing our eyes on Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of faith.”* How to press on in the way of sanctification and grace, when we experience our doubts as John the Baptist does in that prison – it matters where we fix our eyes, on who he is and what he has promised.

And even more explicitly we hear it – we heard how creation will see the glory and splendour – and now we hear: your God will come... John 1 always read on Christmas Eve or Christmas Morning says: *“In the beginning was the Word and the Word was with God, and the Word was God. He was with God in the beginning. The Word became Flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the One and Only who came from the Father full of grace and truth.”* Your God will come, Isaiah says; centuries later John says – he has come! We celebrate on Christmas – the God up there has become the God down here – and Jesus promised to return again. So, be steady, be strong...

*When God comes.* The eyes of the blind be opened. Ears of the deaf unstopped. Lame will leap like a deer. Mute tongues shout for joy. This can be a spiritual meaning – Isaiah in his calling, chapter 6, was told of the spiritually deaf and spiritually blind. And so, this is a time when the people will finally see spiritually and hear spiritually.

But as we heard in the Gospel, (Matthew 11:v2-11), Jesus when asked if he was the Messiah, says 'report to John what you see and hear. The blind receive sight, the lame walk, the deaf hear...' Your God will come, Isaiah says, and healing will come with him – signs of his presence, signs of his kingdom. It is a beautiful image – the knees that gave way, will be transformed to leap for joy. Transformation of nature will be seen in the human body, as well as the human heart and spirit, we have a foretaste of that day – of that consummated kingdom – in the works of Christ – we see the kingdom breaking in... And that kingdom would and will continue breaking in, at moments in history, as we see in Acts and in the centuries since, like the lame man in Acts, begins the day lame, lame for 40 years, and end of the day, leaping, jumping praising God. Jesus says to John the Baptist– think about what is being said and done, and how it fulfils the prophecies in places like Isaiah 35 and 61, and let that answer your question if the Messiah has come...

Recovery, transformation, resurrection, not just for creation but for the human life.

And if we follow this idea of human transformation, and how Jesus takes these words of Isaiah and applies them to his own ministry, we next hear Isaiah say: 'water will gush forth in the desert'. It brings strong memories of us of Ezekiel 47 – the river of life flowing from the throne and how it brings new life, and then Jesus takes that idea, and applies it to himself, "*Whoever believes in me, as Scriptures has said, rivers of living water will flow from within them. By this he meant the Spirit.*" (John 7). At this point, it is yet again an image of what will be in the distant future, but also of what the ministry of God in our lives – through the Spirit – the places where jackals lay – the troubles,

the dangers – are driven away and instead comes areas of growth, the barren places, that don't bear spiritual fruit, will be fruitful not just for us but for others. What an amazing view of the life of God that Isaiah paints, embraced by Jesus that we seek Edith and ourselves to know and discover and dwell within...

And God builds a snelweg – a highway (!). There was a man, Sietse, travelling back and forth to work along the A28 all the way from Utrecht to Groningen. His wife was waiting up for him and she saw on the news how on A28 there was some guy going the wrong way on the snelweg. She rang him on his phone – Sietse be careful on the A28 there is some guy driving the wrong way along it. One guy, said Sietse, there are loads of them!

There is a right way to go, Isaiah says, the Way of Holiness, for all those who walk with a holy life, all those the Lord has redeemed, those he rescued and set free, it will be safe route – and it is a route that leads to Mt Zion, where enter the city singing – and it is a beautiful image. But Hebrews takes us further: Hebrews 12 says – *“But you have come to Mount Zion, to the city of the living God, the heavenly Jerusalem, You have come to thousands and thousands of angels in joyful assembly.”* Jesus who declared he is the Way, the truth and the life. The Christians were first called THE WAY – they found the way of Christ – the one to walk along, they found it a place of holiness through the cross, they found that despite what happened in life, that nothing could snatch them from the Father's hand that nothing could separate them from the love of God revealed in Christ Jesus our Lord, they discovered the joy that Jesus longed for us to have. Jesus prayed in John 17 *“I am coming to you now, but I say these things while I am still in the world so that they may have the full measure of*

*my joy within them.*” That image of those who enter Mount Zion – they enter singing – yet it says everlasting joy will crown their heads – the joy to be in the believer, to be the glow within each of us. And it says: gladness and joy will overtake them and sorrow and sighing will flee away. The words for *overtake* and *flee* in Hebrew are military ones. The first word – *overtake* – means to pursue and catch the enemy. The second – translated *flee* – is how people retreat from an enemy to save their lives. So Isaiah says for the believer – gladness and joy will pursue, capture, catch the believer. Wow. And Sorrow and sighing will run away from their lives... Wow, as the people in Jesus’ day saw as he demonstrated the kingdom, and as Hebrews says, as they approached Mount Zion.

It is a beautiful poem. But we see the themes repeated again and again. Recovery, transformation, resurrection – the dead places coming to life – the God up there becomes the God down here . It is a vision of the distant future. Yes. But we see Jesus apply this to his own ministry – the kingdom is proclaimed and shown and the church continues to proclaim that kingdom praying the kingdom to break in as in the days of Jesus. But as holy believers, we have his Spirit within us, who can takes the burning sand and makes it into pools, that we can be strong and take confidence from the promises of God, and that God longs that joy and gladness will capture and catch us, and sorrow and sighing will flee from us.

Shall we pray.

O Lord, raise up, we pray, your power  
and come among us,  
and with great might recover and transform us;

that where, through our sins and wickedness  
we are grievously hindered  
in running the race that is set before us,  
by your bountiful grace and mercy speedily help and deliver us;  
and help us to fix our eyes on your Son,  
let your joy chase and capture us, and may we walk the way of  
holiness.

through Jesus Christ your Son our Lord. Amen.