

# New Kilpatrick

Sermon

11th December 2016

Isaiah 61:1-11

***Spirit... come upon us... your people here... come upon us with imagination... with truth... with the deep longing for renewal of all that bends away from the light... and turn us towards it once more... so be it... Amen***

Being Scottish... I like my own personal space around me... and without trying to appear rude... I tend to take a step backwards from people who stand too close... Indeed that distance has increased with each generation... Apparently we tend to stand further away from each other now than we did before...

Texting is a godsend... Now you don't have to be within five miles of someone anymore... but still be in their company...

When I was in the US many years ago at a conference... a mostly American crowd... and me... were in worship when the worship leader... after singing a song he had just written... which was all a bit sugary... having grown up singing at least one metrical psalm every Sunday... said to us all... I think we should just turn to your neighbour and give them a hug...

At which point... I took such a step backward that my chair fell over... the air temperature in the room... fell at least 10 degrees... and I started coming out in hives... The person beside me... who had turned towards me for a hug... could feel the air freeze... and immediately turned the other way saying... "Okay... you're not a huggy person"... It was the under-statement of the conference...

And we all laughed about it... but no one ever invaded my personal space again... Part of that worship... which is the real point of telling you this story... was that we were all asked to tell a story about someone who had been Christ for us in our lives...

One spoke of a constant friend through an illness... another someone who spoke up for them as a child when they were bullied at school... and one after the other... we heard stories of compassion... comfort... and kindness... until one person stood up and said...

“Well the first thing I thought about when I tried to think who had been Christ to me was... ‘Who in my life has told me the truth so clearly... I wanted to kill them for it?’”...

She never told us who it was... but the soft, cosy Jesus was gone... the cuddly bubble had been burst... and a new impression of Jesus... the one who steps in to challenge and disturb and upset... had arrived... by telling the truth so clearly... you wanted to back away...

The first few words we read in Isaiah today... are also the first few words we hear Jesus speak... as he takes up his ministry... These words of Isaiah... are the words that define what Jesus is about and what his ministry will be... and what the priorities of heaven are...

But more than that... these first words of Isaiah... define and describe the advent of God... and proclaims a vision of what will come to pass... in the one to come...

And here is where the truth about advent possibly becomes a little uncomfortable... Isaiah uses these words... as a mirror for the Hebrews as they return to Jerusalem... and start the rebuilding... but these first words... speak the truth about God’s return... and are you going to back away from them... or are you going to sign up to them... asks Isaiah...

Then when Jesus speaks them... he uses them to set out the advent of heaven... and whatever those who heard them thought of Jesus... this was the bubble bursting manifesto... Not that God was first saving a nation... but first good news to the oppressed... binding up the brokenhearted... proclamation of liberty to the captives... and release to the prisoners...

There is a Latvian French philosopher called Emmanuel Levinas... whose insight into the kingdom... is confirmed by these words... He says... in all things... we should not begin by drawing up rules... and doctrine... to use as a guide to how we respond to other people...

Instead... begin with the other... respond first to the oppressed... and the brokenhearted... and the captive and the imprisoned... and through your experience of doing that... grow the morals and values of your faith system... You always begin with the other...

Now this isn't a comfortable faith... You can't rely on what God is going to be like... because you don't know... You only know what God is like... when you respond to the other... to your neighbour...

If we believe these words of Isaiah... that the advent of God prioritises how we live in relationship with those who are in need of Good News... and if Jesus uses these words at his advent defining his ministry... then we are being called to live first towards the other... long before we work out who God is and what Jesus is like...

We only get to know God... when we respond to our neighbour... who is imprisoned (in homes)... brokenhearted (with loss)... oppressed (by prejudice)... in captivity (in Aleppo or Mosul)...

Of course... let us balance that in reality... with how this particular congregation has responded so generously... to the needs of others... locally and globally... the gift service last week... the lights for Aleppo... Daybreak, Christian Aid and toilet twinning... plus the four charities that will benefit from our Christmas offerings this year... to name only those we have responded to *this* month...

It is an example of starting with the other... and growing our faith and our community out of that experience... rather than the other way around... What we believe... what is Christian... is always secondary according to Jesus...

Those words of the prophet... proclaim good news to those in need... before we say anything else... define anything else... believe anything else...

And perhaps... this is an incarnation faith... We are living out the deep down truth of the story we tell of Jesus birth... For this story illustrates surely... more than most... that we start with the other... for there in a stable Jesus was surrounded by shepherds and travellers... not the jews or the religious...

But more than that... Incarnation begins with the other... That is the very definition of incarnation... God is Emmanuel... God is one of us... God is our neighbour... Surely these are the ones who are Christ to us... the truth our world seems to find hard to hear...

But the prophet says one more thing... Proclaim good news to the oppressed... the brokenhearted... the captives... the prisoners... This is the year of the Lord's favour... In other words... this is your salvation... in how you live towards the other...

May the world find salvation in these words of the prophet... and in The Word... who's advent bursts our personal space... and becomes one of us...