



A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

An Advent Course based on the prophecies of Isaiah

Week 2

Light amidst the darkness

The Bible is full of the imagery of light and dark, and in the work of creation the Lord made the two great lights and 'saw that it was good' (Genesis 1. 18). To the psalmist, the Lord is light and salvation (Psalm 27. 1), and his word is a lamp to the feet (Psalm 119. 105). The prophet Isaiah called upon the people to 'walk in the light of the Lord' (Isaiah 2. 5), while Amos warned the people that the day of the Lord would be a day of darkness, not light (Amos 5. 18), a day of judgement, not rescue.

In the New Testament, it is in John's gospel that we most often find images of light—the light that shines in spiritual darkness. The tragedy was that people seemed to prefer the darkness, while the good news was that the true light has dawned for all (John 1. 9, 3. 19). Most significantly, it is Jesus who is identified as the light of the world, the true light (John 8. 12).

The prophecy of Isaiah

The prophecies concerning Jesus as the Suffering Servant come from that section of the book of Isaiah which is generally known as Second Isaiah (chapters 40-55). Probably announced by a single prophet following in the tradition of Isaiah from

Jerusalem, they come from the period of the Exile in Babylon around 540 B.C. By chapter 49, Babylon itself was facing defeat by the Persian empire under Cyrus, and the prophet was concerned with preparing the people for their return to Palestine. It is therefore a period of emerging from turmoil, one in which there was good reason for hope and in which the people were called to renew their faith in the promises of God. His rescue act (salvation) not only offered the people the possibility of restoration to their homeland, but it would also indicated his faithfulness and was a call to them to live as a beacon of that faithfulness and power to all the nations.

Jesus, the bringer of light

Jesus himself made few personal claims, and it is not entirely clear in what terms he saw himself (the gospels bring their own interpretation to that). But it is certainly possible that he did identify himself in some way with the Servant figure in the prophecies of Isaiah. Even in the synagogue (Luke 4. 16-22) in Nazareth Jesus did not make that direct identification, and focused more on the coming of the day of the Lord than on his own role. But that he had a unique part to play is clear.

RELEASE TO CAPTIVES

Introduction

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me...to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners.

Isaiah 61. 1

‘The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.’

Luke 4. 18

There were two clear marks of the vocation of the prophet - he was anointed and he was sent.
In the case of the king and the high priest, the anointing - the pouring, or smearing, of oil over the head - was done literally, indicating their consecration to their office.

You shall anoint Aaron and his sons, and consecrate them, in order that they may serve as priests.

Exodus 30. 30

In the case of the prophet, this was understood in the metaphorical sense - the Lord anointing the prophet by the pouring out of his Spirit upon him. In Isaiah 42. 7 the Lord declares that he has put his Spirit upon the prophet (anointed him, consecrated him) and sets out the tasks for which he has been consecrated.

In the case of Jesus, this anointing with the Spirit is understood by the gospel writers to have taken place at his baptism.

Although we often speak of Jesus Christ almost as though these were his forename and his surname, more strictly we should speak of Jesus *the* Christ (Christ meaning 'the anointed'). It describes his status as the one anointed by God, and his role as the kingly figure who would be his people's Saviour.

As well as the anointing, there was the positive 'sending'. Prophets were often reluctant to speak the words they felt they had been given to proclaim. Their message was often hard and unpopular, but they were impelled by their sense of vocation through which God sent them as messengers, as his voice to his people. They were appointed by God and came, as it were, from the presence of God.

Jesus, too, was understood as having been sent by and from God.

But (Jesus) said to them, 'I must proclaim the good news of the kingdom of God to the other cities also; for I was sent for this purpose.'

Luke 4. 43

The sending of Jesus can be understood as part of the continuing outgoing activity of God which is at the heart of his nature - what has been called the *missio dei*. All mission originates with God; it is his initiative. And just as Jesus was sent, so he sent his disciples.

One of the tasks that Isaiah understood he had been anointed for and sent to do was to proclaim liberty and release. And Jesus adopted this as one of his tasks.

Prayer

Come Holy Spirit
and open to us the treasures of God's word.
Grant us a readiness to listen
and an openness to learn;

that through your anointing
we may understand our calling as servants of others, proclaiming release
to those who are imprisoned.
We ask this in the name of Jesus
who came as a light to the nations. Amen.

Reading

I cry to you, O Lord;
I say, 'You are my refuge, my portion in the land of the living.'
Bring me out of prison, so that I may give thanks to your name.
The righteous will surround me,
you will deal bountifully with me.

Psalm 142. 5,7

Points for reflection

1. It is sometimes suggested that Church only increases people's sense of guilt, yet Jesus promises to release us from the imprisonment of guilt and sin.
 - How do we experience that freedom, and how as a local church can St Stephen's make that available to others?

Prayer

For the forgiveness of sins, we give thanks;
for release from guilt, we give thanks;
for the freedoms we enjoy, we give thanks.
For all who live in exile from their homes, we pray to the Father;
for all who are in prison, we pray to the Father;
for all who bring liberty of spirit, we pray to the Father.

You are invited to continue by saying the Lord's Prayer and to end with:

We look for the coming of the Lord of light, the Child of Bethlehem,
the giver of freedom.

Come, Lord Jesus.

