



A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

An Advent Course based on the prophecies of Isaiah

Week 3

Light amidst the darkness

Advent itself is set in the Church's calendar in the dark days that look forward to, and long for the coming of light – the birth of the Christ child, the light of the world. Advent provides us an opportunity to prepare our spirits to welcome the coming of the one whose light is rescue and salvation from all that darkness holds. But the darkness and the deeds of darkness have first to be recognised for what they are, to be repented of and turned from, so that we might delight in walking in the light.

So in the promise of light there is also judgement upon the darkness – the darkness within each one of us and within the society of which we are a part. Advent is a season of penitence, a purple season, a preparation season. The light will not be recognised for what it truly is, and will not be welcomed and lived by without such preparation.

The prophecy of Isaiah

Isaiah 49. 6, 'I will give you as a light to the nations', is from the second of the so-called Servant Songs. It is a poem in which the Servant speaks of his commissioning from birth and of being given a message that is both for Israel

and beyond. Light and salvation are to be brought to all people. As exiles are freed to return to Jerusalem from all over the world, and as the returning journey is made easy by a caring God, the whole of nature rejoices and celebrates (Is 49. 8-13).

SIGHT TO THE BLIND

Introduction

‘I am the Lord, I have called you in righteousness, I have taken you by the hand and kept you; I have given you as a covenant to the people, a light to the nations, to open the eyes that are blind.’

Isaiah 42. 6-7

‘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, and recovery of sight to the blind.’

Luke 4. 17

By the age of 46, the poet John Milton was completely blind. It is generally agreed that it was around this time that he wrote the poem ‘On his blindness’, in which he sought to come to terms with his blindness and the demands of God. He concluded that while many rush all over the world to serve God, ‘They also serve who only stand and wait .’ His most famous poems, ‘Paradise Lost’ and ‘Paradise Regained’, were written in his blindness and at a time when he was impoverished.

In the UK, one in nine of those who are over the age of 60 are currently living with sight loss, and by 2050 the total number of people with sight loss is expected to reach four million.

In the developing countries, the statistics are far worse, and the social and economic effects of blindness are also proportionately more severe. Of the 285 million people globally suffering from sight impairment, 90 per cent live in the developing world.

In times of less advanced medical help and when the causes of blindness were less known and less treatable, blindness was a serious problem. Little wonder that it was among the social and personal ills that Isaiah saw that the Lord had

called his people to rectify. In his account of the event at the Nazareth synagogue, Luke inserted the recovery of sight to the blind into the list of tasks that the 'anointed one' was to fulfil as outlined in the prophecy of Isaiah.

In their gospels, both Mark and Luke understood physical blindness as a metaphor for a failure to understand, on the part of either the Jewish religious leaders or the disciples. The blindness of the religious leaders was their failure to realise the significance of Jesus as the 'anointed prophet'; and the disciples could not see that the only way Jesus could fulfil his divine commission was through suffering, death and resurrection.

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 receive the gift of insight,
that we might live by the light of your truth.
We pray for all whose sight is impaired,
at birth or through accident, disease and old age;
and we pray for all who work to help them.
We ask this in the name of Jesus
who came as a light to the nations. Amen.

Readings

The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul;
the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;
the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart;
the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;
the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring for ever;
the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

Psalm 19. 7-9

You may also want to read Mark 10. 32-52.

Points for reflection

1. Jesus asked, 'Can a blind person guide a blind person? Will not both fall into a pit?' (Luke 6. 39).
- What do you understand by this saying, and what does it imply for the

congregation of St Stephen's?

2. Think of any experience you have had in the past when you felt as if 'the scales were falling from your eyes' (Saul had this same experience, which is recounted in Acts 9. 1-19).
 - How were you changed by that experience? What or who do you think was behind it?
3. John Newton, the slave trader, radically changed his views on the slave trade and wrote the hymn 'Amazing Grace', whose first verse concludes with 'I once was lost, but now am found, was blind, but now I see.'
 - Think for a moment of other major shifts in public and social views or attitudes. What current attitudes would you like to see changed?

Prayer

To keep us from false teaching and misunderstandings,
may your light surround us.

To lead us into the way of your truth,
may your light surround us.

To fill us with understanding for those whose sight is impaired,
may your light surround us.

To overcome the darkness of our fears,
may your light surround us.

To bring us hope in times of doubt,
may your light surround us.

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.

