



A LIGHT TO THE NATIONS

An Advent Course based on the prophecies of Isaiah

Week 4

Light amidst the darkness

The fact that Advent, a season of penitence, comes round on an annual basis reminds us that the life of faith – our walk with Christ who is the light – is not a single event. Rather, it is a journey with its delights and doubts, with times when we feel close to the Lord, and times when we feel far away. Advent is a time when we can take stock of our spiritual well-being. It is a time when we can reflect on those places of our lives where the light of Christ has not yet reached; or where it needs to reach even deeper.

The prophecy of Isaiah

When Isaiah wrote 'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour' (61. 1-2), the context has changed compared to that of previous chapters in the book.

God's people are no longer in exile in Babylon; the first exiles have returned and the rebuilding of the Temple has begun. They are in Palestine, and some of the early enthusiasm and high expectations of the Israelites have faded. They faced

economic difficulties, and there was antagonism between those who had returned and those who had stayed in Palestine during the Exile.

The prophecy in Isaiah 61, while primarily about Jesus, goes beyond the immediate present and looks to the New Age, which is the fulfilment and goal of history. In that day, the people of God will themselves will take on the role of bringing light into social, economic and personal darkness. They are to be proclaimers of the good news that God's promise will not fail; that there is rescue for the oppressed; that light will be given to eyes that cannot see; and that a time of prosperity and spiritual well-being is coming through the activity of God.

FREEDOM TO THE OPPRESSED

Introduction

'Is not this the fast that I choose: to lose the bonds of injustice, to undo the thongs of the yoke, to let the oppressed go free, and to break every yoke? Is it not to share your bread with the hungry, and bring the homeless poor into your house; when you see the naked, to cover them, and not to hide yourself from your own kin?'

Isaiah 58. 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, to let the oppressed go free.'

Luke 4. 17

Oppression is a chronic, long-term condition, and in the struggles for power and empire there have always been those who have suffered oppression. It was true in Isaiah's time; it was true in the days of Jesus; and it is still true today.

Slavery is perhaps the most obvious general manifestation of oppression, where entire races have had little hope for freedom. Exile also has its own characteristics, and those who are driven from their own country as refugees are oppressed by their loss, even if attempts are made to alleviate their desperate state. For others, oppression can arise simply as a result of gender, colour, race or economic condition.

Oppression is not simply a passive withdrawal of people's rights; it is the active

constraining of their freedoms. This is what is conveyed by the image of the yoke. The oxen have no right to decide which way to turn, but must follow the direction of the driver exerting pressure through the yoke. It is both a weight and a means of limiting freedom of choice. To be released from that is to enjoy a greater physical freedom and (metaphorically) a greater moral and spiritual freedom as well.

Paradoxically, when Jesus promised that he would offer rest to those coming to him who are weary and carrying heavy burdens, he did so by inviting them to take on his yoke—'For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light' (Matthew 11. 28-30). To be directed by Jesus is to discover our true selves and therefore the freedom to be ourselves.

Those who are people of God's kingdom—who have, as it were, placed themselves under the rule of God's way of justice and love—are the ones who are called to show compassion to the needy and to the oppressed.

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 lives are blighted by oppression;
for all those who suffer from broken relationships
and from brokenness of spirit.
Grant them the freedom of your releasing and healing power.
We ask this in the name of Jesus
who came as a light to the nations. Amen.

Readings

The Lord is a stronghold for the oppressed, a stronghold in times of trouble.
And those who know your name put their trust in you, for you, O Lord, have
not forsaken those who seek you.

Psalm 9. 9-10

You may also want to read Luke 13. 10-17.

Points for reflection

1. In what ways do you understand Jesus's saying, 'my yoke is easy'?
 - How might his 'yoke' bring rest and release from burdens?
2. 'Better to light a candle than to curse the darkness.'
 - In what ways does/might St Stephen's seek to 'light a candle' for those who experience oppression?
3. What experience have you had of being weighed down by a burden or being 'broken into pieces'?
 - What helped to relieve the situation, bringing release and healing?
4. In Greek, the words 'wholeness', 'healing' and 'salvation' have linguistic connections. In what ways does this help our understanding of what 'salvation' means?

Prayer

Come, Lord Jesus, with your healing power
and mend the broken fragments of our fractured world;
the peace between nations torn by violence;
the rights of individuals denied by oppression;
the love between people destroyed by selfishness;
the wholeness of spirit disrupted through sin.
Help us to remove the burden of oppression from others
and to take on your yoke to direct our lives
and to give rest to our souls.
Amen.

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.

