

# St Thomas Zoom Service Talk for Advent 3

Sunday 13<sup>th</sup> December 2020

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For the second week running the Gospel reading speaks about John the Baptist denying that he is the Messiah but confirming that the Messiah is coming soon. But what did the Jews expect from the long-awaited Messiah? Today's reading from the prophet Isaiah gives us an idea.

Isaiah was speaking to a Jewish kingdom threatened by their war-like Assyrian neighbours. After the time of King David's son Solomon the kingdom had split in two, often fighting against each other. The southern kingdom, known as Judah, included Jerusalem (the site of the Temple, of course), Bethlehem and areas to the south of there, while the northern kingdom, referred to as Israel, covered Galilee, Samaria and the regions to the north. The Assyrians (based in and around Damascus, to the north-east) had recently conquered the northern kingdom, plundering its riches and deporting as captives the wealthy and the skilled people. Now Judah was in its sights - and Judah was in a state of confusion and despair.

Too many people had turned away from God, everything was falling apart, and the promise God had made to Abraham ("I will give you this land, and your descendants will be uncountable"), the covenant he had made through Moses ("you will be my people and I will be your God"), and prophecy he gave to King David ("I will establish your throne for eternity") all looked to be receding into fantasy. In this dark hour God spoke through Isaiah to confirm that his holy power would bring about the better time the Jews all longed for. The Jews themselves couldn't save the situation - in fact they continually made things worse by departing from God's will for mercy, peace and justice, and by disobeying his commandments - but God could, and would, save it.

Because of what God would do, broken-hearts would be bound up, captives would find freedom, gladness would replace mourning, the nations would look up to the people of God with admiration, and all would rejoice in the Lord. The passage implies that God will not just change the circumstances of his people, but will change them as well so that they can be accurately called "oaks of righteousness" and so that they will "display his glory". With the benefit of knowing what happened during and after Jesus's time on Earth, we can see that God brings this personal change about by the action of his Holy Spirit, which he gives to us when we join his people in baptism.

Although spoken through Isaiah, the words of the passage are understood to be the words of the coming Messiah, who will be God's means of bringing this restoration about. At the time that the prophecy was given, the hearers would have expected that the ones to be restored by God would be God's people, and no-one else - in fact, many seem later to have assumed that the restoration of the Jews would be at the expense of everyone else. But God's plan is much more ambitious. In chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel (verses 16-21) Jesus returns to Nazareth at the start of his ministry and reads from this part of Isaiah. He gets to the line "to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" but instead of going on to read the next bit "and the day of vengeance of our God" he simply stops and hands the scroll back, before claiming to have just fulfilled that prophecy - thereby claiming to be the Messiah. Because the restoration to a good relationship with God, and all the benefits and joys that brings (just read them again in this passage!), is not just limited to one people group; but because of what Jesus the Messiah did and how he lived and died that restoration is open to all, including us.

In this difficult year it can be hard to see, even with the prospect of vaccines, how our world will recover from the problems it has got itself into. But we have the assurance from God that we *will* recover in the long term; even if (for example) the incredible sacrifices of the front-line workers and the wisdom of leaders falls short, we see in Jesus that God's plan to bring us, and all creation, into his Kingdom is sure. The final outcome was settled on the cross on that first Good Friday; and we have been given the privilege of being part of how that victory over sin and death works out across the world. The part we are called to play, individually as Christians and collectively as a church community, is vital for bringing God's healing and restoration to the local area of St Thomas and around.

So, as Paul wrote to the Thessalonians, let us rejoice always, give thanks in all circumstances, and hold fast to what is good; because the one who calls us is faithful!