

Sunday 26th July 2020

Christ the declaration of God's new world – Isaiah 42:5-9, Ephesians 2:11-13

Talk by Russ Jones, Prayers by Margaret Davies

Good morning. Thank you for downloading the talk from St John's for Sunday 26th July. Margaret will lead us in our prayers, and then I will read the passages for today, which are Isaiah 42:5-9 and Ephesians 2:11-13, before I give a talk on them.

Firstly, an introductory word of Scripture. God promised through Isaiah 'I will lead the blind by ways they have not known, along unfamiliar paths I will guide them; I will turn the darkness into light before them and make the rough places smooth'. Let's remember that we have been invited by God the Father to accept the gift of full and eternal life through his Son Jesus, reclaimed from the world's blindness and brought into light by God's grace.

Now Margaret will lead us in prayer.

Prayers

Almighty God, we come to you in the name of Jesus Christ in awe and wonder that you are a Holy and amazing creator God. We praise and thank you for making us in your image and yet you know us intimately by name and lead and guide us.

But we turn away from you, so Jesus says, "Repent". Therefore, we confess that we have sinned in thought, word and deed. We have not loved you with our whole heart, we have not loved our neighbour as ourselves. In your mercy, forgive what we have been, help us to amend what we are and direct what we shall be, that we may do justly, love mercy and walk humbly with you our God. God forgives us.

Therefore, Lord, as a forgiven people because of Jesus Christ's sacrifice for us and the gift of his Spirit we can come to you in prayer.

We pray for your will to be done in your broken world. Lord, bring change, bring peace where there are wars and violence. Give wisdom to all those in government and the authorities of the nations, so that your kingdom can be built up. Our Heavenly Father, so many people are suffering from destitution, becoming refugees due to wars. Bless those who are unemployed or homeless too. We pray that governments, aid agencies and missions will be able to supply shelter, food, education, employment and dignity and so build your kingdom here on earth. Bless, comfort and strengthen people who are persecuted for their faith in you.

O Lord God, we pray for the worldwide church's mission to spread the gospel of your love, especially those we support. Jason and Tracey Day, working in Thailand and their children, Ruby and Libby. Please give them their physical needs of good health, secure finances and housing. Also Jennie Archibald's work with refugees. May they all have a full measure of your loving assurance with energy and strength for their mission.

Others suffer at this present time caused by the Covid 19 epidemic. We pray that correct procedures will be followed to control the infection and that you will bless all the health services. Give them the strength and guidance needed to help and heal people. Thank you for all the experts researching medication and vaccines. May the trials be successful.

Thank you, Lord, for our church fellowship connected remotely at present. Thank you for our wardens, Ian and Steve, the church council and leaders continuing our worship, Bible studies and pastoral care. We pray for Andrew, our treasurer and Sue our administrator. We pray that we will continue to serve you in plans for opening the church for prayer and worship, through the CAP centre, food bank, school and supporting each other in your love. We pray for the future, that you are choosing the right new vicar for us. Prepare us and them for change ahead in your service.

Our loving heavenly Lord, we pray now for many in need. Please heal the sick, especially anyone who is suffering from the virus. For members of our congregation. Please continue healing Lorraine Baker, Yvette Evans, Val Beckway and anyone else we know..... Support the elderly like Keith and Barbara, comfort those who are grieving like Jean's family just recently, give some friendly contacts to the lonely because of shielding, and financial security, employment and shelter to those who need it.

Lord God, we pray now that as we listen to your word and teaching, that your Holy Spirit will teach us to grow in knowledge, love and serving you.

We pray all these prayers in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ who has gone before us to reign with you and prepare a place for us. **Amen.**

Isaiah 42 V5-9

⁵ This is what God the Lord says—

he who created the heavens, and stretched them out,
who spread out the earth and all that comes out of it,
who gives breath to its people,
and life to those who walk on it:

⁶ “I, the Lord, have called you in righteousness;
I will take hold of your hand.

I will keep you and will make you
to be a covenant for the people
and a light for the Gentiles,

⁷ to open eyes that are blind,
to free captives from prison
and to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness.

⁸ “I am the Lord; that is my name!
I will not give my glory to another
or my praise to idols.

⁹ See, the former things have taken place,
and new things I declare;
before they spring into being
I announce them to you.”

Ephesians 2 V11-13

¹¹ Therefore, remember that formerly you who are Gentiles by birth and called “uncircumcised” by those who call themselves “the circumcision” (that done in the body by the hands of men)— ¹² remember that at that time you were separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel and foreigners to the covenants of the promise, without hope and without God in the world. ¹³ But now in Christ Jesus you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ.

Before the talk a short prayer.

Heavenly Father, please help us to understand our calling in response to your words, as we think about them today. We thank you that you have spoken to us through the Scriptures and ask that you use them to bless us. Amen.

The two passages today are like a 'before' and 'after' picture, such as a detergent advert where a man is trying to clean the grime off his kitchen surface. He's got the cleaning fluid but it isn't working. Then he tries the new product and the grime disappears with a single gentle swipe of a cloth, leaving a sparkling new worktop. Isaiah was writing in an in-between time, when Israel had gone into exile – they were stuck in a dirty kitchen - but not yet rescued and brought back to right relationship with God. To pursue my comparison a bit further, though to be honest I probably shouldn't, God is saying, first speaking through Isaiah: 'I gave you everything you needed but you didn't follow my instructions, but at least you now admit that your kitchen is filthy, so, second speaking through Paul's letter to the Ephesians, I've sent the ultimate cleaner to you, my own servant, the Messiah'.

Life had been radically altered for God's chosen people, Israel. Their complacency had been shattered; they had thought that they were the chosen ones, and the outsiders, the Gentiles, could never touch them. Now they were banished from their homeland, their capital and the Temple destroyed, forced to go and live in the pagan empire of Babylon. Our world has been changed recently and we wait to see whether any of the changes will be long-lasting. I was reading this morning how a well-known fashion chain will close many of its real shops for good because people have come to accept and prefer online shopping. They will stock fewer goods as people are less interested in enormous choice, and they will focus on ethically sourced products. This sounds as if people's thinking has been altered by the virus outbreak.

Our life as Christians has changed too with meetings on computers instead of in our church building. Perhaps this is a reminder to us that we are pilgrims in the world, living in it but not of it. All Christians are wandering outsiders waiting for their true homeland - with God - to arrive, whether his will is done here or in heaven. The word parish comes from 'paroikia' which referred to 'foreigners', the dispossessed who lived outside cities because they didn't have the rights of Roman citizens. Parish has come to mean the opposite, not the dispossessed on the margins, but the establishment centred on the largest building in town. Jesus was crucified at the rubbish dump outside the city walls and we are called to accept the same place and accept that we are part of the marginalised people who are found there. Everyone in God's church, even those privileged with wealth (though that's not really a problem for St John's), is outside the boundaries of worldly thinking, is part of the marginalised of this world. When you think about it, vicars are displaced people who have to move lock, stock and barrel away from their settled home into new parishes, where they do God's work and live out their trust in him. When we get a new vicar, and let's keep praying that a devoted and loving man or woman will come to us, we want to welcome and support them as they wander in their own journey.

Prophets, including Isaiah, spoke from the margins, warning against the dangers of cultic worship, high places, and religious leaders who obsessed about the Temple. That Temple, God's home, was gone. It was back to the tents, and the wilderness journey. Israel was called to be a people under contract to God, and a sign of what it was to live with God's loving promise. They thought it had all failed and they had been abandoned, but God says to them here: 'I will keep you and will make you

a covenant for the people and a light for the Gentiles'. Their mission was to release people from physical hardship, and spiritually 'to release from the dungeon those who sit in darkness'.

We can't do that alone. That's why God promises to support us and guide us. He says: 'I will take hold of your hand'. He won't let us take credit for what we do in our own strength either, or to trust in false idols like money, cleverness or our physical abilities. We are to rest on his right hand and trust in his Son, Jesus, sent to save us and help us.

'See, the former things have taken place,' God said through his prophet. God had revealed his power and favour for his people through material blessings, through the gift of the Promised Land, and through miraculous military salvation of Israel, but this had failed. Israel became proud of its chosen status and were not a light to outsiders. They looked down on Gentiles, the uncircumcised without the appearance of Jewish identity. They were sent into exile, back through the desert where their ancestors had travelled with Moses. Those were 'the former things' but now God makes his announcement: 'New things I declare'. They were going to be restored, but not by a military conquest this time. Instead they would be allowed to return to their homeland under the permission of Babylonian power, a power that was still under God's control, as Isaiah often makes clear. This is indeed a new thing. An exiled people, Israel, was repatriated by an enemy who commanded them to rebuild their Temple and pray for him. They had no powerful leader to assert their rights. They simply depended on the Babylonian emperor, Cyrus, who, they were told, was under God's control.

How does this newness, this status of dependent wanderer, play out in our lives as New Testament people of Christ's promise? Last week's passage from Ephesians, verses 1 to 10 in this chapter, reminded us of Jesus' qualities. His willingness to suffer as part of God's plan, without crying out, his kindness and strong support for the weak: 'a bruised reed he will not break'. God announced his plan hundreds of years before the Messiah comes. Paul's words in Ephesians are very much the 'after' part of the picture once the Messiah has given his life so that 'you who once were far away have been brought near through the blood of Christ'. Everything he writes here emphasises that we used to be 'separate from Christ, excluded from citizenship in Israel, and foreigners to the promise'. Because of Christ's sacrificial blood shed for us, we are now citizens of God's nation, but we must get rid of the usual ideas associated with 'nation' because we are citizens of the land of Christ, which covers every geographical place on Earth. We haven't been given a rich Promised Land where we can live, settle down and forget about our need for God, as Israel did. Instead we are to be a light and a help. Jesus has shown us how to be that, and has taught us how to see the world around us. We have come close to him and he will hold us up with his right hand. Isaiah reminded people that they had not been abandoned by God in exile; he was about to restore them with something new. Paul reminds us that God is forever new once we believe in Jesus the Christ, that God's newness is unfathomable and forever trustworthy.

To end, a petition. Jesus, we thank you and bless you that you have welcomed us into your holy presence. We know that, without your help, we cannot live out your desires for our lives fully, so please bless us. Help us not to trust in the things of our world, this spiritual wilderness, but to accept that your power is sovereign. Help us to live as you wish, we pray. Amen.

Thank you for listening to our service.