

**2023-12-17 ... 10am Wordship Sermon ...**  
**Revd Roger Farnworth**  
**Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11 & John 1: 6-8, 19-28**

I wonder whether you recognise these words?

*We aim to 'build and safeguard a fair, free and open society, in which we seek to balance the fundamental values of liberty, equality and community, and in which no one shall be enslaved by poverty, ignorance or conformity. We champion the freedom, dignity and well-being of individuals, we acknowledge and respect their right to freedom of conscience and their right to develop their talents to the full. We aim to disperse power, to foster diversity and to nurture creativity.'* [Quoted in the Liberal Democrats Manifesto of 2019]

How about these words? ... *We will: 'build a fairer Britain that cares for all, where wealth and power are shared. ... unlock the potential of all those held back for too long. ... launch the largest-scale investment programme in modern times. ... kick start a Green Industrial Revolution. ... The Future is Ours to Make. It is time for real change – for the many not the few. Together we can deliver it.'* [Labour's Manifesto of 2019]

*'We Will Put You First. ... Getting Brexit done. Investing in our public services and infrastructure. Supporting workers and families. Strengthening the Union. Unleashing Britain's potential.'* [Conservative Party Manifesto of 2019]

Now, who first spoke these words? ... *'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, the day of vengeance of our God.'* [The prophet Isaiah].

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These words come from the latter part of the book of Isaiah. They are the prophet's manifesto for his ministry among the people after the exile in Israel. A place of hope and new life. They are a political statement of the prophet's intent, his focus and his priorities – just like those manifesto statement from our political parties that I read out this morning. But they are more than that too. They express God's desires for God's people.

They follow the passages from Isaiah that we know as those about the Suffering Servant - the one who Isaiah sees as taking the sins and problems of the people onto his own shoulders. The one who, by his actions, brings forward the coming of the Kingdom of God, the day of the Lord.

There are two people who have traditionally been associated with these words that we read from Isaiah - the first is John the Baptist - and that is why the people who have compiled our lectionary put the reading from Isaiah alongside the reading from John's Gospel about John the Baptist on the 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent. John called for repentance and for change, just as Isaiah did. ... So, on the third Sunday of Advent which is both Gaudete Sunday and the Sunday which places a focus on John the Baptist as a herald of good news, we hear what that Good News is. ...

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.'*

The other person associated with those words of Isaiah, as you will of course know, is Jesus. In a well-known passage in Luke's Gospel, Jesus uses the words from Isaiah as his own manifesto.

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When those listening to Jesus hear him using these words of Isaiah to refer to himself, his listeners will immediately have recognised their context in the scroll of Isaiah. They should have understood that in claiming these verses as his own manifesto, Jesus was not only taking the place of the suffering servant of Isaiah but also the predicted and long-awaited Servant of the Lord.

Both John the Baptist and Jesus call us to take Isaiah's manifesto for his prophetic ministry seriously, to understand that they too share that same manifesto.

Both John and Jesus exhibited lives that were sold out to their message, ... both ultimately willing to die for what they believed to be right.

Both John and Jesus call us to follow them in repentance and in bringing in God's kingdom. A kingdom - as Isaiah tells us - of justice and peace, where all are treated fairly - the poor and the oppressed have the same rights as the powerful. A kingdom, a world, where the whole created order is cared for.

Isaiah and Jesus talk specifically of 'the year of the Lord's favour', the Jubilee year, which came round once every 50 years in the life of Israel when, according to God's instructions, all land lay fallow to recover, when what had been borrowed was returned, where land was returned to its historic owner. Isaiah's manifesto, the one Jesus selected as his own, was one for the whole world - both people and creation.

Now that is all very well. We could vote for a leader who chose those values and lived by them. But, there is so much more for us here. ... Throughout his ministry and his teaching, Jesus saw his followers, and through them, all of us, not as the equivalent of voters reading political manifestos and choosing who to support and vote for, but as members of the party.

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Jesus expects us to be activists, he expects us to share his values. Jesus expects us to understand that ministry for Jesus is not just about feeling safe and secure in our faith, but about living by faith, trusting in God's provision for us.

He expects us to understand that our discipleship and our ministry is about: preaching good news to the poor; proclaiming freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; releasing the oppressed; and proclaiming the year of Lord's favour for all creation. He expects us to understand that we are called to work to make God's kingdom a reality here in Whitchurch, in Shropshire, wherever we live and work.

So let's listen again to Isaiah's manifesto, the manifesto that John the Baptist and Jesus shared. And as I read it out, and in some moments of contemplation after that, let's commit ourselves again to serving Christ in our own community.

*'The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour'.*