

<b>Saturday 12<sup>th</sup> December 2020</b> <b>Cathedral, Grahamstown</b> <b>10 a.m.</b>		<b>Advent - Embertide</b>
Isaiah 61:1-4	Psalm 145:1-7	2 Corinthians 5:14-19
		John 20:19-23
<b>Good news</b>		

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me; he has sent me to announce good news...”  
(Isaiah 61:1a)

## **GREETINGS AND INTRODUCTION**

Greetings to Bishop Ebenezer, your dear wife mama Noncedo; members of Cathedral Chapter; your spouses; honorary Canons; clergy colleagues and your spouses; all our guilds; the people of God; those who are to be ordained today; your families, and the parishes where you are serving: I greet you all in the name of our Lord and Saviour, Jesus Christ.

Together with dioceses elsewhere in ACSA, we are gathering under difficult conditions. The Covid pandemic has impacted on our lives in so many ways. Who would have thought, in March this year, that come December we would still be dealing with the effects of this frightening pandemic. It has challenged our very existence. We have faced economic hardship, disruption to our schools and universities, sickness and death. This past week here in Makhanda (Grahamstown) saw the death of Augusta de Jager, wife of Ds Strauss of the NGK. And we are not out of the woods.

But life continues. Our witness as the people of God continues. Throughout the time of covid lockdown, although our buildings closed, the life of the church – worship, prayer, witness, service - continued. During this Advent season, ordinations are taking place all over ACSA and indeed all over the world. Even during the darkest days of human history – warfare, plague,

famine, national disasters – the life of the church has continued.

## **ADVENT & ISAIAH**

We are in the season of Advent. The word “Advent” is from a Latin word which means “arrival” or “coming”. Advent is the season when we focus on the coming of Christ into our lives and into our world; the season when we are reminded of the second coming, the return of Christ as Lord and King and Judge at the end of time.

Bernard of Clairvaux summarises the theology of the season of Advent as the three comings of Christ, past, present and future. “In the first, Christ was our redemption; in the last he will appear as our life; in this middle coming, he is our rest and our consolation”<sup>1</sup>.

Jesus comes into our world in his birth at Christmas; he comes into our lives as Lord and Saviour; he will return as King and Judge at the end of time, at his second coming.

The Old Testament readings during Advent are often from the prophet Isaiah. And so Isaiah is the prophet for Advent, the one who speaks to us of what is to come; the prophet who opens our eyes and our hearts to the nature and the purposes of God. Isaiah gives us a picture of who God is, and what God will do in and through his chosen people.

The book of the prophet Isaiah has three parts to it. Each part comes from a particular era in the history of Israel: First Isaiah is the time before the exile (1-39); Second Isaiah is the time of the exile and shortly before the return to the promised land (40-55); Third Isaiah is the time just after the return to Jerusalem. Our reading today (Isaiah 61:1-4) comes from this third or post-exilic period.

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<sup>1</sup> ACSA Lectionary 2020-2021, pg 6

This post-exilic period was a time of crisis. Much had been broken down and destroyed. The returning exiles were faced with the task of rebuilding the temple. The life of worship needed to be revived. The community needed to be restored. It was the time of prophets such as Zechariah and Haggai, Ezra and Nehemiah.

It was a time of struggle for the soul of the nation. What sort of community would emerge? What were the values that would be central to its life? These themes and struggles can be seen in Third Isaiah: would there be room in the community for foreigners, for strangers? Would there be love of neighbour? Or would this emerging community turn in on itself, care only for itself, preserve its life above all else? Isaiah presents us with this great gift of all God's possibilities – what the chosen people are called to be; but we also see the people of God as a place of deep dispute and division, where fear and anger and hatred are very real.

We are in a time of crisis, a time of struggle for the soul of the nation and the soul of the church – not merely ACSA, but the church in southern Africa. The tragedy of our time is when pastors and politicians enrich themselves from the pockets of the people. Here at the Cathedral we have been praying for months, for the Zondo commission in its investigation into state capture.

This is the context for the outpouring of the Spirit of God.

## **THE SPIRIT OF THE LORD**

“The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me...” (Isaiah 61:1a).

It is a human agent who is speaking – the prophet; the chosen one; the nation – “who is authorised and energised to do

Yahweh's deeply transformative work in the community of Yahweh's people"<sup>2</sup>. The spirit rests upon this one: the spirit of God that swept over the face of the waters at the dawn of creation (Gen 1:2); the great spirit or wind that drove the sea back and turned the sea into dry land so that the waters were divided (Ex 14:21); the spirit of the Lord that came mightily upon the young David when he was anointed by Samuel (1 Sam 16:13) – the spirit of God that creates, that liberates, the empowers, is now upon this one: you; me; those whom God has called. It is God, Yahweh, who “moves, summons and authorises what is to follow”<sup>3</sup>.

That is the commission the church received from Jesus after the resurrection. “As the Father has sent me, so I send you.” (Jn 20:21b).

Jesus breathed on them and said to them, ‘Receive the Holy Spirit...’ (Jn 20:22b).

In a few minutes time, the Bishop will lay hands on those being ordained, with the words, “Receive the Holy Spirit for the office and work of a priest in the church of God.”

What is the one who has received the Spirit, sent to do?

## **1. To set free**

“...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, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to provide for those who mourn in Zion...” (Isa 61:1b-3).

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<sup>2</sup> Brueggemann, W., 1998. *Isaiah 40-66*, 213

<sup>3</sup> Brueggemann, 213

This empowered human agent – this servant of God – is to bring, to bind up, to proclaim, to release, to comfort, to provide. In the words of Jesus in the gospel, “If you forgive the sins of any, they are forgiven them; if you retain the sins of any, they are retained” (Jn 20:23).

“All of these actions are powerful ministries to the weak, the powerless and the marginalized...”<sup>4</sup> – this is a restoration of the enormous imbalances in the community. It is jubilee (Leviticus 25). It is good news – it is gospel – and it is taken by Jesus in Luke 4:18-19 as his game plan, his vision for his ministry. The words of Isaiah are profoundly uncomfortable for those “who value and benefit from the status quo”<sup>5</sup>. The words of Jesus in John’s gospel are words of blessing and liberation. Forgiveness. New life. New beginnings. Hope.

## **2. To transform**

“... to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit” (Isa 61:3)

It is a move from grief and despair to jubilant celebration; from crucifixion to resurrection; from pain into joy. It is the outworking of the gospel in our lives. We encounter the love of God on the cross of Christ; “while we were still sinners, Christ died for us” (Rom 5:8). This very great gift.

## **3. To build**

“They will be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, to display his glory. They shall build up the ancient ruins, they shall raise up the former devastations; they shall repair the ruined cities, the devastations of many generations” (Isa 61:3b-4).

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<sup>4</sup> Brueggemann, 213

<sup>5</sup> Brueggemann, 214

We receive the Spirit to build, to rebuild – the church, the kingdom of God, families, our communities.

## AND SO...

We have in front of us – and especially in front of you who are about to be ordained – this vision of ministry, of freedom, of the good news of Jesus. Much of our life and work as the people of God is lifting up the broken-hearted. Bringing healing and hope to broken lives. Opening doors. Setting people free from the power of sin. Pointing people to the cross of Christ, the love of God. Standing for justice, for the truth, for what is right.

We know all too well the issues we face. Gender based violence. Corruption. Abuse of power. We all need conversion and a change of heart.

Just one example: Last weekend (5<sup>th</sup> – 6<sup>th</sup> Dec) saw the funeral near Elliotdale of a mother and her five children, all hacked to death allegedly by the mother's 34-year-old partner. The Education MEC Fundile Gada said, "one message that is being revealed by this incident is that there is a need for ***a reconstruction of the soul or reorientation of the mind*** [my emphasis] in particular of the manhood so that we understand that we coexist with women"<sup>6</sup>.

"As the Father has sent me, so I send you." God gives us the Spirit to set free. To transform. To build. To embrace with the love of Jesus.

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<sup>6</sup> SABCNews, 6 December 2020. Nkululeko Nyembezi, "Slain Eastern Cape family of six laid to rest."

## **CONCLUSION**

May the Lord, who has called you, strengthen you, and fill you with His Spirit.

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Dean of Grahamstown  
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