

Sermon for Evensong on the Sunday after Christmas-Day, 30th
December 2018

Isaiah 61; Galatians 3:27-4:7 - Gentiles

Do you remember when Jesus started to read in the synagogue - it's in Luke 4, from verse 17 - and he read out from the Book of the prophet Isaiah, and then said, 'This day is this scripture fulfilled in your ears.' In other words, He was the Messiah, which Isaiah had prophesied about, had foretold in our lesson tonight, chapter 61, and chapter 61 was what Jesus was reading out.

That prophecy is all about the salvation of Israel, deliverance from its oppressors, from the Assyrians, the Babylonians, the Egyptians - and latterly, it would be, from the Romans - deliverance from slavery; because the Israelites were the chosen people of God, and God would keep his promise to them.

That's as you would expect. Jesus was Jewish, he was an Israelite. He was brought up in the Jewish culture. The gospel of St Matthew, aimed at a Jewish readership, is at pains to set out his genealogy, tracing it back to King David, son of Abraham.

But truly, if the story of Jesus had just been a Jewish story, just been a story about Israelites, that story would have remained a footnote in history. But the genius of St Paul was to realise that the one true God is the god of everyone. There isn't just a god for the Jews, or for another national group - or in those days, for the Romans. God is far bigger than any question of nationality or origin.

And so we have this great passage in the Letter to the Galatians:

*There is neither Jew nor Greek, there is neither bond nor free,
there is neither male nor female: for ye are all one in Christ Jesus.
[Gal. 3:28f]*

Just as Isaiah had prophesied,

*“I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
And their seed shall be known among the Gentiles, and their
offspring among the people”*

God’s chosen people are no longer to be regarded as being just the Israelites, but rather all those who are ‘in Christ Jesus’, who are Christians. They are God’s chosen people now. *‘Their seed shall be known among the Gentiles’*, just as much as among the Jews.

Paul’s mission to the ‘nations’, (which is what the Latin-based word ‘gentile’ means), to the non-Jews, opened the door to Christianity becoming a universal religion, and there is no bar in it to anyone on the grounds of nationality, or colour, or origin: being, and becoming, Christian, and indeed that key expression in St Paul’s thought, being ‘in Christ Jesus’, is integral to the way he understands God: that God is at the heart of everything, the ultimate creator and sustainer of all our being.

But although Jesus’ coming as the Messiah meant that we should look wider than just the sons of Abraham, the Israelites, in order to find who are God’s chosen people, nevertheless, in Isaiah’s prophecy, there are some key truths which, maybe, started as distinctive Jewish or Israelite concerns, but nevertheless now have a worldwide or universal importance.

Important among these is the concept of justice.

*‘.. to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the
prison to them that are bound;
To proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord, and the day of
vengeance of our God’*

This is all about the rule of law. In the Jewish Law, the ‘acceptable year’ is the Jubilee year, is the year one-in-seven when debts were forgiven; when people were allowed a new start. Not that the law disappeared, but that its application was tempered with mercy. ‘The quality of mercy is not strained’, if you prefer Shakespeare. [The Merchant of Venice, Act IV, Scene 1]

‘For I the Lord love judgment, I hate robbery for burnt offering’. Don’t go out and pinch your neighbour’s things so as to be able to afford to put more in the collection plate. The Lord loves judgment. The Lord loves the law. Do the right thing. And the right thing is a message of renewal and, as I have observed so often, and particularly in Advent, the message of the Bible is one which is full of the counter-intuitive, it is often contrary.

See, Isaiah foretells opposites: ‘... *beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness*’. This is not a message of despair: this is a message of hope. But it is hope based upon a fresh appreciation, on repentance, on throwing away the old truisms; casting off slavery; slavery, which means forcing people to work for less than they need in order to pay the rent and to buy food. And look, in this vision of justice, Isaiah sees that

‘strangers shall stand and feed your flocks, and the sons of the alien shall be your plowmen and your vinedressers.’

Strangers. Sons of the alien. That is what the Millennium looks like. There is nothing wrong with people coming and joining our society and doing useful jobs. But note that, both in Isaiah and in St Paul, it’s not the case that origins and nationality are obliterated. It’s more a question that there is no hierarchy of worth, based on nationality or origin.

'There is neither Jew nor Greek, neither bond nor free, neither male nor female.'

It doesn't literally mean that. It means that the connotations of being Jewish, or the connotations of being Greek, what it means to be in slavery, what it means to be free, what it means to be a man, what it means to be a woman, do not include connotations of worth: or to put it another way, they are all equally worth.

It doesn't mean to say that they are all the same. But it means that you can't say, just because somebody is from a particular country, for that reason, they are less entitled to share in the world's riches than someone who is from Hollywood - or from the British Hollywood, Cobham.

So as we begin 2019 on Tuesday these are very timely lessons. In the good society there is no room for xenophobia or nationalism - although we can celebrate our differences and enjoy the riches of each other's culture. We can explore new foods, new literature, new ways of looking at things, that come from different places of origin.

I was blessed, earlier in my life, in having ten years of fairly constant travel, to all sorts of other countries. I really enjoyed learning about different ways of life and making friends with people in other countries. But today, there is a worldwide movement against this, based on nationalism and xenophobia. Freedom of movement, for our young people to be able to do as I did, to travel freely throughout the world, to live and work in different places; and the other side of that coin, for people from other countries to be able to come freely here, to make their life here if they want to do so, by working hard and contributing to our society, that freedom is being overtaken, overtaken by narrow nationalism.

We should recognise that there is '*neither Jew nor Greek*' in the Kingdom of God: that we are all sons and daughters of God, descendants of Adam and Eve: and Jesus is the second Adam, 'a second Adam to the fight' as the hymn puts it. He is really Everyman - He is for everyone.

Amen.

Hugh Bryant