

Sunday 13 December (Advent 3), a Reflection

We know about wind in these parts. What the BBC weather webpage cheerfully calls a 'moderate breeze' has the power to bring down branches. The wind seems to pick up speed as it comes down the lee-side of the Pennines and we feel its power.

But wind does not always need to be so destructive to make its force felt. Exposure to fresh air and a gentle breeze can help us absorb more oxygen, help us both concentrate and sleep better, aid our digestion and, so I'm told, many more other benefits than I'd risk listing here. The links are so tangible that it's no accident that wind, the life-giving force of God and the very breath we breathe, are so often poetically combined in the Bible.

God's Spirit may be like the wind, but it does not need to blow us off our feet to make its effect. A gentle breeze can be profoundly transformative.

The wonderful passage from the Prophet Isaiah we read today inspired Jesus himself at the start of his public ministry, and it still provides those of us who seek to follow Jesus with a powerful manifesto and a reason for an upwelling of hope. Isaiah's passage also claims authority and that this is intimately bound up in the gift of God's spirit – something that Jesus seems to have felt keenly and, according to St Luke, quickly led to conflict which saw him driven out of the synagogue in Nazareth by an angry congregation. But others, we read, immediately afterwards, in Capernaum, were astounded at his teaching - because he indeed spoke with authority.

Isaiah's message was directed first to those who had suffered captivity in Babylon. The message of liberty to the captives would have been taken quite literally. They had been oppressed for two generations and had been almost beyond the hope of good news. These verses may well have been penned after their return from captivity, but the memory of it is still raw. No wonder their hearts, even their very spirits were broken, but just when it seemed things could not get worse Isaiah had proclaimed his message of hope from the roof tops. They were going home and their old lives would be rebuilt. And their God would come in vengeance, which means that the oppressive forces that had held captive them against their will would be broken. Good will prevail.

The same message, preached so powerfully by Isaiah, was taken up by Jesus, but reminding us that release, deliverance and salvation can take many different forms as will the new beginnings and rebuilding that follow.

Jesus's special concern for the poor – God's special concern – has its roots here and in the conviction that for society to be rebuilt in the way that God wants, everyone has to be included. Everyone is loved and valued by God, which is a deeply

subversive message if it might mean that your privileges and apparent superiority might be under threat if they are based on maintaining a tacit or even an unknowing exploitation of others. It's little wonder that right from the beginning, Jesus's authoritative message met with strong opposition; as it always will be, as we who are called to be Christ's body in our world should know well.

There's lots more about Isaiah's remarkable prophesy that we could we could learn from, not least its insistent and important message about the abiding role God has in his plan for his chosen people of Israel, a message that can never be repeated too little; but I want to shift the focus, briefly, but firmly from Isaiah though Jesus to us and to the way in which this ancient and wonderful message brings us hope as we look forward to a society renewed and the binding up of our wounds and broken hearts as a result of Covid.

Just as it did for with the exiles returning from Babylon, Isaiah's resounding message of hope reminds us that we must first hold on a bit longer and cope with brokenness of the situation in which we find ourselves. The pandemic still poses a potent and horrible threat. The future may be assured, but not before there is more suffering.

The outpouring of joy this week as the first vaccines were administered in Britain was wonderful to behold (I loved the fact the headline: 'All's well that ends well: Shakespeare gets Covid vaccine.' 81 year-old William, who lives in Warwickshire, was the second person to receive the vaccine), but we know that difficult days lay ahead of us and even when all this is 'over', life can't be quite the same.

The rebuilding and healing that we, as Christians, are called to do, as we respond to Isaiah's vision, will not simply be a restoration of how things were, but an opportunity to learn from the last nine months about what really matters and how we must build on that in the coming months. Those who are broken-hearted need to find meaningful healing. Those who have been held captive in the fear of self-isolation need to learn to trust the company of other people, and we all need to learn to respect the root of their fears. Together, we must all work together to rebuild our ruined cities and their economies in a way that will provide a lasting and more hopeful future for us all, one that will take seriously the desolation we have wrought on the good earth that God has given us.

It's an enormous challenge, but one we can look forward to with hope, if we allow God's transforming Spirit to blow gently through all the tiny crevices of our lives. We can then dare to believe that we will be blessed with God's own authority. Our hope will be real.