

ST AIDAN'S UNITING CHURCH

SUNDAY 26 DECEMBER 2010

Rev. Anneke Oppewal

Isaiah 61: 1 - 4; John 1: 14 - 18



“The Word became Flesh”

‘The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me; 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 - to give them a garland instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit. They will be 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...’

They are magnificent words, those words from Isaiah. Words full of longing and full of trust, words full of vision and full of power, conjuring up imagery of a world and a place where all is well and everyone finds wholeness and joy, where war is a thing of the past and cities are places of peace with their citizens thriving and secure.

These words and others like them have been read around Christmas for two thousand years. With none of them becoming reality other than for short spans of time, in limited areas at best. For two thousand years, while these words have been read, there have been captives and prisoners, there has been reason for sadness, ashes instead of garlands, mourning instead of gladness, faint spirits instead of praise, ruins and devastations instead of peace and security.

And even where we are fortunate enough to be living in a time and a place where we enjoy peace and security, where there are good social and health care systems to look after us, it doesn’t mean those words of Isaiah are reality, even for us. Because even though we live in a part of the world that is affluent and comfortable, we are still touched by grief, by brokenness, by faint spirits, devastation and death. Just open the newspaper and you’ll know what I am talking about. Just look around you and I am sure there will be things happening to people you know that break your heart. And I am sure, even closer to home, each and every one of us lives with the experience of brokenness in one way or another ourselves. Things that make those words of Isaiah resonate deep inside our souls, with hope, with longing, with a vision of something that is still eluding us, but maybe, one day.....

In Jesus’ day this was no different. People lived in a world as violent, crazy and full of devastation as we do. They were touched by illness and brokenness as much as we are. They longed for peace, for wholeness and unrestricted, untainted joy as we do.

And, like we do, they read the words of Isaiah and the other prophets and drew encouragement and comfort out of them. And had done so for hundreds of years. Not because they thought they were going to become reality tomorrow, or the next day, or in a much further future, but because even having the vision and dreaming of another reality will lift the spirit and straighten your back. Just like it does with us.

When Jesus came, for his followers something changed in the way they read these texts. No longer were they “just” words of hope and vision for a far away future that would probably never come. They became a program. A program for a world that had taken shape in one person, and now called

for commitment of others to follow his example and do the same: Give shape to those words of Isaiah and make them reality.

Someone, testified Jesus' followers, testify the gospels, came and made these words happen. When he came, liberation happened, he healed and brought joy where there was brokenness and grief. Gladness and praise became a reality in the life of people who thought they would never see the day. It was no longer a dream, something that might happen some time in a far a way and not very likely future, but it had become reality, here and now, in this world, on this earth, in this reality. It became flesh.

The way this took place was completely different from what people had, over the centuries, expected. There wasn't a king like David who took the reigns and shook up the country. There wasn't fire and brimstone raining from heaven to punish all the baddies and angel song to promote all the goodies to higher glory. There wasn't a sudden, miraculous, ceasing of all hostility. It wasn't even that suddenly a cure for all illness became available. Nothing like that. On the contrary.

If anything, the darkness seemed to grow deeper. When we read the story we hear about a baby in a manger, toddlers murdered in Bethlehem, a man thrown out into the wilderness to struggle with demons, opposition, ill will, betrayal, hatred, and finally a violent death.

And yet. It was in this baby, this toddler, this man, this life, that the gospels tell us the divine appeared and the words of the prophets became reality and turned into flesh. Because, in the end, after all is said and done and the whole story has been told, it is not the sadness, the pain, the violence and death that win the day. It is love, the garland of gladness, the oil of joy, and the mantle of praise that prove to be the strongest.

In the middle of the Icon we see: A baby in a manger, looked after by his mother, hidden in a cave, with the divine light touching his little head and the angels singing their songs, while around him the inky darkness of the cave speaks of murder and threat. This is the promised King, this is the Lord's anointed who will turn this Isaiah text into reality. This, says the gospel, is God bringing a new reality to birth in this world with all the darkness and strife it contains. How? By loving it to bits. By giving everything.

The word became flesh. Isaiah happened, and lived among us. Not as a mighty king who came to set the world aright, but as a vulnerable, fragile, baby. He suffered, he met with illness, with sadness, opposition, betrayal, violence, and every other inequity we humans encounter in our lives. He loved, he cared, he healed, he did justice. He was passionately committed to making the vision real in his day and age, and succeeded with every breath he took. Not by knocking the world around him into shape, by beating some sense into it. But through compassion, generosity of Spirit and a life lived by God's word.

When he died he left his followers with the vision of Isaiah amplified, beckoning them to follow in his footsteps and model their lives on his, so more of that vision would become reality, and more, and more. Pushing the darkness aside, letting the light of God in, allowing the Spirit of God to do its work in their lives as much as it had in his.

We no longer live with just a dream, but we live with the certainty that it is possible to give the dream shape in reality, here, now, in our lives, in our world. Gives it shape where babies are born in stables, where small children meet with an untimely and violent death, where people find themselves in the wilderness struggling with demons of the spirit and the flesh, where illness breaks in and violence wreaks havoc. The world is still the same, but we, thanks to Christ, are enabled to be

different in it. Because we know, that in the end, it is not the darkness that is stronger, but the light. Not hatred, but love. Not war, but peace. We have seen God at work, gently working his way towards the morning of a new dawn. Amen.