

**Sunday 15 December 2024, 3<sup>rd</sup> Sunday of Advent, Choral Matins**

**Isaiah 35**

**The Revd Dr Evan McWilliams**

I love the book of Isaiah. I really do. It's a rich set of prophecies couched in dramatic language, sometimes stormy and sometimes soothing. Isaiah is a mini-gospel on its own. Of all the prophets, Isaiah is most often quoted in the New Testament, that is around 80 times. It is alluded to something like two-hundred times. One could, just from the quotations of Isaiah, construct a viable Christology which would be recognisably Christian. And that's the point in quoting him; the Gospel and Epistle-writers believed that the God they came to know in Jesus Christ was the God about which Isaiah wrote, the messiah towards whom he pointed.

Chapter 35, which we heard in our first lesson, is a perfect example of this mini-gospel. Isaiah prophesies to God's people- weak, fearful, trembling. He tells them not to be afraid because God is coming to save them, and coming with vengeance. They need not fear those who have taken them captive or made them afraid because those powers will be destroyed. How are they to know this is happening? How are God's people to know he is coming to save them?

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.  
Then shall the lame man leap as an hart,  
and the tongue of the dumb sing.

Here are four concrete signs of the coming of God's salvation. The blind shall see, the deaf shall hear, the lame shall leap, and the mute shall sing. The representative faculties of human existence- sight, hearing, movement, and speech- shall go forth unfettered, unrestricted, free.

Shall we examine the ministry of Jesus, looking for these four signs of God's salvation? First, the blind shall see. In Mark 8 Jesus heals a blind man at Bethsaida. In John 9 Jesus heals a man born blind, a man whose blindness others tried to blame either on his sins or those of his parents. In Matthew 9 two blind men come to Jesus asking to receive their sight, and he answers their requests and heals them.

Second, the deaf shall hear. In Mark 7 Jesus heals a deaf man who also had a speech impediment which Jesus cures at the same time.

Third, the lame shall leap. In John 5 Jesus heals a lame man at the Pool of Bethesda. In Luke 5 at Capernaum Jesus heals a paralysed man whose friends let him down through a hole in the roof. To this man Jesus also says, 'Your sins are forgiven.'

Fourth, the mute shall sing. In Matthew 9 Jesus casts a demon out of a mute man, granting him the ability to speak again.

Other instances are summarised in Matthew 15 where we are told *And great multitudes came unto him, having with them those that were lame, blind, dumb, maimed, and many others, and cast them down at Jesus' feet; and he healed them.* These miracles, according to Isaiah, were signs that God had come to save his people. And the nature of the miracles is significant because, as I noted earlier, the faculties of sight, hearing, movement, and speech are definitive of what it means for us to be human. We are embodied beings and when we struggle with one or other of these faculties, we are prevented from engaging with the world and with others.

Now, I must be careful here. In saying that these faculties are definitive, I do not mean that those who cannot see, hear, walk, or speak are not truly human. But what I do want to acknowledge is that bodies normally operate after a certain fashion because they are intended to do so. This is why we go out of our way to correct or accommodate when these faculties are impaired in some way. What Isaiah points towards, and what Jesus symbolically fulfil by his miracles, is the restoration of humanity to an idyllic state in which there is no need for correction or accommodation.

The coming of God to save is portrayed as the restoration of the body, but we know full well that this restoration is itself representative of something greater. Those four faculties of sight, hearing movement, and speech are themselves symbols. The healing of the eyes represents the giving of true spiritual sight or understanding. The healing of the ears represents the giving of true hearing or discernment of the truth. The healing of the limbs represents the giving of the ability to act and live a godly life. And the healing of the mouth and tongue represents the giving of pure and holy speech dedicated to the service of God.

What God comes to do in the lives of his people is to save them and set them free both in their bodies and in their minds and hearts. God as we see him in Jesus Christ inaugurates a new kingdom in which all our faculties are set free from the limitations of sin and enabled to serve our divine Lord and Master without halt or impediment. The message of the gospel of Isaiah, if we can call it that, is that God comes to set us free to be his people, *to serve him without fear* as Zechariah says in his 'Benedictus'.

Being set free to serve of course presupposes some form of captivity, captivity symbolically pictured as blindness, deafness, lameness, and being mute. To be unable to see clearly, to hear correctly, to move easily, and to speak truthfully is a condition I think we all recognise for ourselves. As we receive then this message from Isaiah's gospel, knowing that in Jesus Christ healing is freely found, let us come again to him as did those blind, deaf, lame, and mute ones of old and ask for that healing and a place in his kingdom by the forgiveness of all our sins. Amen.