

SERMON, 13 DECEMBER 2020 – ISAIAH 61, JOHN 1

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

PHOTO – GARRATT WINDOW

I had a Zoom call last Wednesday with Becky and Dawn from St Nick's, David from the Methodist church, and Rashell from Broadway – a chance for the local ministers to catch up (sadly we can never persuade anyone from Woodlands or our Catholic friends to come and join us). In normal times we meet to chat and pray every few weeks, and we've kept doing it during Covid. We are doing some things together – and if you haven't been following the Advent Window Trail round Allestree, please do. Becky's organised it – and Preschool have done a lovely window in our church hall, and Amy, Colin, Louis and Horatio have [this] one on Devonshire Avenue.

PHOTO – DA CAROL SERVICE

But so much of last Wednesday's conversation was what we're not doing. No Carol services, no crib services, no this, no that, no the other. And I know it is the right decision to be saying "No" – it is going to be several months before enough of us have been vaccinated and we can all feel a bit safer, so we have got to be patient. But even this grumpy old Scrooge would quite like the opportunity to go Christmas shopping, would like to go and enjoy Christmas Dinner with the kids at Walter Evans school, would love a noisy Carol sing, and I'd give anything to go down the pub with the kids.

PHOTO – JOHN THE BAPTIST – CORNELIUS VAN HAARLEM

I am well aware that we all feel like this – too many Nos. So I found the Gospel reading a comfort this morning – I am not the Messiah. Are you Elijah, No. Are you a prophet, No. Members of the choir are no doubt singing "This is the Record of John" by Orlando Gibbons, with the wonderful line "And John said No".

The crowds that had come out to see John wanted to be able to place him. They needed to know who and what he was. We're told elsewhere that he spoke like a Prophet, he dressed like a Prophet, he even ate like a prophet – "locusts and wild honey" anyone? They wanted the Messiah, they wanted someone to drive the Romans out, to restore their sovereignty – nothing changes, does it!

PHOTO – RAPHAEL

The crowds were so large that the religious authorities sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem. And they wanted to know as well – who are you? These are the men who can do the theology, they are the professional religious men, and if you need to know whether John is sent by God, these are the people who can tell you.

John answers them in terms they should understand – he gives them the words of Isaiah “I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness, ‘Make straight the way of the Lord’” – we had those words last week. Today we have other words from Isaiah, again, marvellous words.

#### PHOTO – CAPORALI

The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me – this is not something human, something worldly, something second-rate, something flawed – this is God at work.

The LORD has anointed me – last week I baptised Oliver. I anointed him with oil, I marked the cross on his forehead – these days I can’t use my finger, I use a cotton bud. I poured water on his head – these days I use a shell and it is mum or dad who is holding the baby. It felt so good to be doing my job, exercising my ministry, welcoming this child into the fellowship of the Church – love and joy, never forget the power of God’s anointing Spirit.

#### PHOTO – DI PAOLO

“To bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives” – those three phrases mean so much more this Christmas, as we are living through such a dreadful year. People are oppressed, are broken hearted, feel captive – and our proclamation of God’s light and God’s love in all of this, that is what makes a difference. It’s seen in the little things – the way we care for our fellow human beings, the way we forgive, the way we are light in the darkness – in our churches, our families, our workplaces, our neighbourhoods. It is seen in the big thing – as we seek to follow, to live for God, and encourage others to do the same.

“Bring release to the prisoners” – oh, not sure about that. We feel safer when they are locked away, we want vengeance – indeed in America they will be executing more people than normal this December, because they know President Biden is against the death penalty, so let’s get them dispatched now. And when you read what they have done, do I care? Well, if we believe that all humans are made in the image of God, and all are redeemed by the death of Christ, and all can be forgiven – trouble is, is my faith that radical?

## PICTURE – ANGEL FROM MASK

Let's "proclaim the year of the Lord's favour" – well, we all know we have found the Lord this year. Whether that be in the additional time we have had to savour life, or the joy of learning how to Zoom, or my cheese and bacon scones – but we're also aware that for many people the Lord's favour seems a very long way away. If you are a child with a disability who has not been to school since March, or a person unable to see their parent in a residential home, or someone who's lost their job, or some in an abusive relationship – an Old Testament prophet, or a bunch of Christians, telling you this is "the year of the Lord's favour" is not going to do much for you.

## PHOTO – CAROLS IN CHURCHYARD

We are sad because we will not meet our Lord with our friends in a full, warm and joyful church. We are sad because some of those who usually come and celebrate with us, will be angry that this year they can't. We are sad because our friends are lonely and upset, and we feel so useless. It does not feel like "The year of the Lord's favour".

But we know that God is with us in the darkness as well as the light. We proclaim his favour because God is in the ruins and the grief and the pain and the fear, and in everything. We proclaim his favour because we know God is with us as we kneel before him and worship.

## WORDS OF COLLECT

We are all, to use the words of the Collect "the ministers and stewards of Christ's mysteries", and we must all "prepare and make ready Christ's way" in the life of the church, the lives of those around us, and – first and foremost – in our own lives. May God bless us all this Christmas.

Peter Barham  
11 December 2020