

A Vision For Outreach

From the Epistle of the Second Sunday After Christmas: Isaiah lxi.1ff

The First Sunday After the Epiphany

THE Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, 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; to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

We are at beginning of a new calendar year, and I wanted to make use of the Old Testament text used for the Epistle from last Sunday (*Book of Common Prayer*, pp. 106-107) to assist us as a church in plotting a way forward into the great unknowns of 2016.

The text in question is a famous passage from the prophet Isaiah, which our Lord quoted in part during a visit early in His ministry to His hometown synagogue, when He represented Himself as the prophecy's fulfillment (Luke 4:16 ff.). It describes in detail His mission as Israel's Messiah. But I think it is an excellent meditation for the Church as we consider just exactly what we are supposed to be *doing* in this world. As Christ's Body, we are His physical extension upon this earth — His feet, His hands, His voice — performing those works which were once His alone, now manifested through the millions who make up His members.

Before we begin discussing our calling, let's consider as frankly and honestly as we can the condition of the world to which we are called. In our land, we live among a people victimized by their own relentless choices, and yet strangely unable — or unwilling — to subject themselves and their behavior to any objective criteria. There seems to be virtually no capacity for self-examination or second thought. But this is the stuff of childishness. It is children who are normally expected to act impulsively and thoughtlessly, and we generally allow them room to do so, believing that with time and experience they will develop the wisdom and self-restraint that characterize maturity. But a spoiled, undisciplined generation of adults has no patience nor appetite for self-criticism. They have all the answers. And the authority-figures and entertainment icons they put in place serve only to substantiate this dream-world of an easy life which will never know any accountability. These leaders could be setting responsible standards, and presenting themselves to the public as fit role models. But instead they serve as chief facilitators for those who are anxious to justify their bad choices. And they command the big guns that are aimed to thoroughly discredit any who stand in opposition.

What is the normal, human, reflexive reaction to all of this on the part of those among us who can clearly perceive it? Why..., impatience, frustration, anger, and sometimes even self-

pity, when one realizes that such influences literally control our society, and have all but made that control foolproof and complete. Such a response is understandable. But this is why I want us to look closely at the text, because, in the very midst of the conditions I've described, it gives us a clear commission. This is truly a very large part of what it means to *evangelize*.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me... We begin here. No Spirit, no ministry. He is the activating Principle in the Church, the sovereign will of God making itself literally known among us. Think of it! The experience of watching, seeing, witnessing our Lord actually at work through us. But now comes the actual toil to which we are called, when we must truly roll up our sleeves, and plant ourselves in the very midst of the world, such as it is:

...because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek; he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound...

God has His hand in your back, and in mine, propelling us out of church in order to locate *the meek, the brokenhearted, the captives, and them that are bound*. Who are they? These are the ones whom this careless, carefree age is savaging. These are people of all ages who are only now daring to admit to themselves that they are starving to death spiritually. They are perishing along the streets of a virtual world whose captives are being held through hypnosis. The death statistics are evident in divorces, broken homes, addictions, and a host of mental health issues.

If we have no Christian sympathy for them, we certainly will not be inclined to help them. The fact that this state of things is the consequence of willful acts for which individuals have no one other than themselves to blame neither alters their state of need, nor our mission to them in response. There they are, regardless of how they got there.

What are we to bring them? We are *to preach good tidings, ... to bind them up, to proclaim liberty, and to free them*. The Gospel message of deliverance in Christ, of course, underlies all of this. But in a Gospel-hardened age, and in a Gospel-resistant area, our means must be adjusted accordingly. This has always been the way that *the Spirit of the Lord* has worked. I cannot overemphasize the importance of our living lives that are controlled by God's Spirit. Though we may have to padlock our mouths for the time being, the godly virtues we cultivate will provide mute testimony of our faith in Christ, and may themselves result in any possible openings to share our faith more explicitly, to actually *preach* and *proclaim*. The message which must be declared with the utmost tenderness, ironically, is *the day of vengeance of our God*. We get mad, and wish we could publicly denounce our enemies. Like Jesus' disciples outside a stubborn Samaritan village, we'd like to call down fire from heaven to destroy them (Luke 9:54). But there is no truth upon earth more grave than the judgment of God against sin. So serious is this topic that one can barely whisper it. We would hardly be qualified to offer it had we not first demonstrated our commitment to every other aspect of our mission.

... to comfort all that mourn; to appoint unto them that mourn in Zion, to give unto them beauty for ashes, the oil of joy for mourning, the garment of praise for the spirit of heaviness; that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified.

Perhaps the Church in many respects is in a very real time of preparation. The Israelites of Isaiah's day had witnessed the terrifying retribution of God against national sin. They had been subject to cruel foreign invasion, and many of them had been carried off into exile, forever. Those who remained, viewing the consequence of Israel's sin, realized in the very starkest terms the bitter lessons that arise from turning away from God. In our day, so many are yet blinded to the outcome of rejecting God, even though the culture has already sustained much damage. The din of self-deception has never been louder. It may only be far more manifest and dramatic consequences, that will shake them out of their complacency. The Church needs to be prepared for such a day.

A very real series of earnest questions that we must ask ourselves follows on the heels of these thoughts. Are we ourselves spiritually healthy? *Physician, heal thyself!*, Jesus once quoted (Luke 4:23). A sick doctor can't do much. Are we free of those influences that bind others? Only those who are outside of prison can open doors to free those still within? Is our spiritual eyesight clear and unimpeded? Jesus said, *Can the blind lead the blind? Will they not both fall into the ditch?* (Luke 6:39). Do we know enough of joy to be able to give it to others? Now, the only road to fitness for the sake of this Gospel ministry is immersing ourselves in the things of God. This is why we attend church, why we pay close attention to Scripture, why we are constantly on the alert — each of us individually — to see what lessons Christ is teaching us from the very book of life, itself.

I cannot predict for you personally how this calling will work out in your life. I can only affirm with certainty that it is there. Every day will provide opportunities to fulfill it. We only need perceive of them. And meanwhile, our gathering together here is our principal source of strength and preparation.

This should be a time of anticipation for us. Do we dare to be excited? What indeed does God want to do? How will He do it? How will He make use of His resources in these times?

Let's resolve, hand in hand, to wait together and see.

In the Name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost. Amen.