

Resolutions for the New (Calendar) Year

(From the Text Substituting for the Epistle: *Isaiah lxi:I.*)

1 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; 2 To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all that mourn; 3 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.

Jesus famously quoted the first portion of this extraordinary text from the prophet Isaiah upon a memorable appearance in the synagogue of His home town of Nazareth. It announced the mission of the Messiah which He personally embraced. In this morning's sermon, I want to revisit this passage as if it were a prescription for our own personal Christian ministry. We are, after all, to be imitators of Christ (see Eph. 5:1, 1 Thess. 1:6), walking in His ways, carrying out His mission as His emissaries in the very places He has ordained for us to be in by His divine agency. We are to be "little Christs", which is the actual meaning of the term "Christian".

It is the beginning of a new year, and it is an appropriate time for us to look closely at our callings, both as individuals and as a church. People generally ask themselves such questions when they ponder the resolutions they make: "Who am I? What is my purpose in life? To what should I devote my energies and talents? What things can I divest myself of that are a waste of time and effort?" This is never an easy process, if done honestly and relentlessly, but the result is self-improvement. And throughout the New Testament we are called to this sort of examination:

-2 Pe. 1:10: Therefore, my brothers, be all the more eager to make your calling and election sure.

For if you do these things, you will never fall...

-Philip. 2:12: Therefore, my beloved, as you have always obeyed, not as in my presence only, but now much more in my absence, work out your own salvation with fear and trembling...

Come with me, then, as we examine today's text with an eye to applying it to ourselves. We cannot fulfill it perfectly. Perhaps our efforts will be filled with fault and hesitation. Only Christ was unimpeded by the sin that makes all the rest of us "wounded healers", to borrow a well known phrase. But these verses establish an excellent pattern of Christian service which will light the way forward for us all.

The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me; because the LORD hath anointed me to preach good tidings unto the meek. Here is the first part of our commission. Who are the meek? They have been crushed by the obligations, responsibilities, and pressures of life, and although they may not show the strain for fear of scorn, they are very much at the mercy of their circumstances. We all know what those are today: lives made utterly complex by the sheer number of details we each face; a sense of being out of control, unable to properly manage our families, a host of un-

certainties about this beloved land of which we are a part, and on goes the list. The meek are helplessly caught, and without faith, they are mere victims. To these very ones we are sent with *good tidings*, even though we certainly share their plight. But Christians have a Savior who loves them, who grants them peace in the storm, and very practical help in the conflict. The meek are all around you. Will you *preach* to them through the beauty of your own Spirit-filled life?

What comes next?: *...he hath sent me to bind up the brokenhearted...* It's not only unrequited love that breaks the heart. It's disappointment at failed dreams, over unrealized hopes for success, and visions for children and grandchildren that are ruined by the choices they've made. It's despair over illness, or financial loss, and all unexpected circumstances. Wounds need to be bound up, and none seem so grievous as those to the heart, the center of life and emotion. Can I *bind them up* with the love of Christ? And though I may not have all the answers, even *any* answers, to the awful problems that beset lives, I can at the very least, with God's help, be a Christian presence for them in their time of trouble. And it may take time... Will I *make* time?

... he hath sent me... to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to them that are bound. How many prisons without bars contain hosts and hosts of captives today? Is it alcohol, or drugs, or pornography? Is it gambling, or gaming, or the universe of the internet? Depression or mental illness, or a paralyzing sense of inferiority? Is it the dazzling expectations of an age that holds us all to the standards of super-stars and the super-successful? Is it the constant search for something that will provide me with ultimate satisfaction? Only the Christian really knows that there is indeed one answer: Christ Himself. And if few if any occasions arise where the words of life themselves can be shared, nothing at all is a barrier to a wholehearted expression of Christian love. A picture, after all, is worth a thousand words. And a life that is indeed *free* in Christ does indeed *proclaim liberty to the captives*.

To proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD, and the day of vengeance of our God... Here indeed is another opportunity for witness, and one requiring courage and determination. To stick stubbornly to righteous standards, to refuse to budge off the authority of God's Word when it comes to moral issues in an age of relativism, to keep a straight face at dirty jokes, to refuse to put before one's eyes the folly and laughter and godless comedy of a hell-bent world, all of these loudly proclaim another side of God to those who need to be reminded of it. There will indeed be a *day of vengeance*, and there is much, much wisdom in running to Jesus while one still has a chance. Find safety in Christ while the *year* is still *acceptable*, safety from the wrath He will inevitably pour out upon unrepentant rebellion. This indeed is a part 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...

The consequence of the sort of conscientious ministry described above will result in *comfort* for *all that mourn* who are willing to receive it. Furthermore, they will exchange their misery for *beauty, the oil of joy, and the garment of praise*. What is *beauty*? A truly beautiful person is one at peace with himself, with others, with the world, and with God. Beauty, true beauty, is the proximity of something to the original manner in which God fashioned it. Sin, and pride, and the devil all collude to destroy the beautiful, and substitute for it a cheap and false beauty which inspires nothing other than envy and lust. Redemption in Christ is the beginning of the road to beauty, to harmony with one's God and one's neighbor. Along with beauty come the gifts of *joy* and *praise*. *Joy*, true joy, is a virtually unknown commodity in this world, although smiles abound, and much music strikes the air, and multiplied thousands of paths to it are offered in exchange for filthy lucre. It is a peaceful, silent sort of thing, resting as deep within the heart as something can possibly be, welling up from the springs of love and contentment that only Christ can provide. And *praise* is man's highest duty and privilege. There will never be a loftier calling nor occupation to which we can lend our strength and talent.

Finally comes the purpose of our mission: *...that they might be called trees of righteousness, the planting of the LORD, that he might be glorified...* in other words, to bring others to Christ. If we are successful in imitating our Lord in His calling, the fruit of our labors, as was His, will be adding souls to God's Kingdom, souls firmly planted there, and as strong and mighty as *trees of righteousness*. This is the endpoint, and getting there may be extremely difficult, and may require much, much patience. We must remember that once they, as we, were *broken-hearted, captives, prisoners, and mourners*. Though conversion may be instantaneous, the transformative process certainly usually is not.

But see how wonderful this work is to which we are called! Sadly, many of us have refused the task. We think others will do it, or we don't recognize that the calling to fulfill it is constantly upon us in our circumstances, among the very people who inhabit our lives. We reflexively close our eyes, and shut up our hearts, and therefore miss the occasions presented us. But it is the purpose of resolutions to make changes. And we must be resolute with our resolutions!

How can we truly be Christians --little Christs-- this year? *The Spirit of the Lord GOD is indeed upon us*, not for our own sakes, but to empower us to ministry to others, for God. If we were to read just one more verse in this passage from Isaiah that is not included in today's BCP reading, we would see that there remains a desperately heroic task for us that surpasses in scope even those mentioned above: *And they shall build the old wastes, they shall raise up the former desolations, and they shall repair the waste cities, the desolations of many generations. (Is. 61:4)*. Could a host of healed lives actually result in a healing of God's Church? God grant it!

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