

Tavistock Circuit at Home Service December 11th 2022 - Prepared by Dr Peter Fox

The 3rd Sunday in Advent - **The Joy of the Redeemed**

In Silence let us come into God's Presence. In stillness hear His voice.

(Silence)

When I begin to prepare for this service I always start with the lectionary readings and today's vision from Isaiah with which we begin is particularly full of promise in these times of uncertainty and anxiety.....

Let us reflect on these verses

Isaiah 35 1-10

The Joy of the Redeemed

The desert and the parched land will be glad; the wilderness will rejoice and blossom. Like the crocus, it will burst into bloom; it will rejoice greatly and shout for joy.

The glory of Lebanon will be given to it, the splendour of Carmel and Sharon; they will see the glory of the Lord, the splendour of our God.

Strengthen the feeble hands, steady the knees that give way;
say to those with fearful hearts, "Be strong, do not fear;

your God will come, *he will come with vengeance;
with divine retribution he will come to save you."*

Then will the eyes of the blind be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.
Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy.

*Water will gush forth in the wilderness and streams in the desert.
The burning sand will become a pool, the thirsty ground bubbling springs.*

In the haunts where jackals once lay, grass and reeds and papyrus will grow.

And a highway will be there; it will be called the Way of Holiness;
it will be for those who walk on that Way.

*The unclean will not journey on it; wicked fools will not go about on it.
No lion will be there, nor any ravenous beast; they will not be found there.*

But only the redeemed will walk there, and those the Lord has rescued will return.
They will enter Zion with singing, everlasting joy will crown their heads.
Gladness and joy will overtake them, and sorrow and sighing will flee away.

Reflection Part 1: I was on a bus travelling from Lagos to Umahia in the East. When I asked how far the journey was, I was told '12 hours' - journeys on the main highway were measured in time not distance.

The bus was full - in addition to the passengers in the regular seats, there were those on a bench down the walkway between the seats. At the back of the bus the luggage was filling

the space to the roof and included a full size refrigerator. Next to the driver was a gas stove. And when the bus began to move it seemed to ease itself off the ground as the brakes were released.

The driver's skill in the next 12 hours proved considerable. Not only did he have to avoid the vehicles travelling down the wrong carriageway towards us, of which there were many, but also the burnt out cars and occasional lorry in the fast lane. I wondered about our chances of completing this journey, but was reassured by the lady who sat next to me. For most of the time she read from her Rainbow Bible - warning passages in bright red and passages of reassurance in green.

Periodically she paused for a meal and offered me boiled eggs from a large basket.

I felt calm in her presence knowing the Lord would provide.

And about 12 hours after we had started, in a thunder storm, we did indeed arrive intact!

A reading from the letter of James 5 vv7-10

Patience in Suffering

Be patient, then, brothers and sisters, until the Lord's coming.

See how the farmer waits for the land to yield its valuable crop, patiently waiting for the autumn and spring rains.

You too, be patient and stand firm, because the Lord's coming is near. Don't grumble against one another, brothers and sisters, or you will be judged. The Judge is standing at the door!

Brothers and sisters, as an example of patience in the face of suffering, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord. As you know, we count as blessed those who have persevered. You have heard of Job's perseverance and have seen what the Lord finally brought about. The Lord is full of compassion and mercy.

Reflection Part 2: My visit to Nigeria was for two purposes. First as lay representative from the British Methodist Church to the Nigerian Methodist Conference, and second as a visitor to Amaudo. It is this other purpose which is my focus in these thoughts.

Amaudo used to be a large field of tall grass abandoned and avoided by local people. It lay outside Umahia the main city in this part of Nigeria. It had been the site of a fierce local war where many people had been killed. Following the Biafran War which divided Eastern Nigeria a young English Social worker had been sent to re-establish the leprosy settlement. She proved very effective in this task but then realised that there were many people who were afflicted with mental illness which had largely been ignored. It was a regular experience to find the most seriously ill sleeping rough on the streets or dead under market stalls. The local Governor was sympathetic to her wishes to help and offered a piece of land to build a settlement - Amaudo.

Over a weekend, with other helpers she camped on the edge of this ground, cut down the 10 foot Elephant grass and began the work of building the settlement. They constructed a series of houses in a circle around a small chapel and created a community. That was in the 1980's, I saw it in 1993 where I shared their daily life for a week. By then they had established a proper programme of treatment and care. Patients became part of the family

for six months where they lived together and where if possible were trained in skills which were marketable, before returning to their own families. But they were not then abandoned. Amaudo had a team of mental health nurses who by motorbike provided regular contact for outpatient treatment . Day by day I witnessed the lost being saved. Where most people were passers by Ros Colwill saw what was needed and was inspired to find a solution. This has now spread to other parts of West Africa and continues to bring healing.

Matthew 11 vv2-11

Jesus and John the Baptist

After Jesus had finished instructing his twelve disciples, he went on from there to teach and preach in the towns of Galilee.

When John, who was in prison, heard about the deeds of the Messiah, he sent his disciples to ask him, "Are you the one who is to come, or should we expect someone else?"

Jesus replied, "Go back and report to John what you hear and see:

The blind receive sight, the lame walk, those who have leprosy are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the good news is proclaimed to the poor. Blessed is anyone who does not stumble on account of me."

As John's disciples were leaving, Jesus began to speak to the crowd about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to see? A reed swayed by the wind? If not, what did you go out to see? A man dressed in fine clothes? No, those who wear fine clothes are in kings' palaces. Then what did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. This is the one about whom it is written:

"I will send my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you."

Truly I tell you, among those born of women there has not risen anyone greater than John the Baptist; yet whoever is least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

Silent Reflection - the issues of this week - spend some time considering the issues you have confronted this week - personal, community, national, international.....

In stillness wait upon God.....

Singing the Faith 511

Speak in the stillness, God we pray,
come to our hearts and meet us here.
Bring us your peace for each new day
- the gift of grace to earth from heaven.

We speak as though we have not heard
and live as if we do not know
your love in Christ, the living Word
- the gift of grace to earth from heaven.

When in the anxious rush of days,
we lose our hold on faith and you,
reclaim us with your calm embrace
- the gift of grace to earth from heaven.

Lift us to see with heaven's eyes
We long to soar on eagle's wings
as we press on to claim your prize
- the gift of grace to earth from heaven.

So may we be renewed in love,
held and sustained by you alone
Strengthened by you that we may prove
a gift of grace to earth from heaven. (Amen)

(Gareth Hill b.1956)

Prayer: Lord of every lovely thing - you call us to love you with all our heart, soul and mind and to love our neighbour as ourself, we aspire to this quality of loving but often fail in our endeavour, keep us mindful today and everyday, that this is only achievable in the power of your Holy Spirit.

Keep us focused on you - listening to your word and sensitive to your instruction as we seek your way for our lives - and witness to those around us.

Forgive us our failure and renew us.
In the name of Jesus Amen

The Lord's Prayer

**The Grace of our Lord Jesus Christ, The Love of God, and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit be with us now and always
Amen**