

**9 September 2018**

**Trinity 15**

**Isaiah 35.1-9**

**The 5<sup>th</sup> evangelist – Creation our teacher**

I thought I'd begin this morning with a bit of a recap on my sermon of last week. I say that not only because you might not have been here to catch but also because I wasn't. I think that's the first time at St Andrew's that I've missed my own sermon. And poor Kathryn and Michael only had a few cards with some scrawled Hebrew letters to go on so they might not have been able to communicate everything that was very clear in my head but not so easy to convey in a bedside conversation when I'm speaking from a befuddled brain out of one side of my mouth. But what I hope came across was that Isaiah (y-sh-a-yah) in the original Hebrew means much the same as Jesus (yah-sh-ua) – God saves. It's not quite the same but it's pretty similar, just as there are striking resemblances between the teaching of Isaiah and the teaching of Jesus – sometimes because their message is similar or delivered in a similar way, and sometimes because the prophet points forward to a day when they may have some fulfilment in the years not long after the words are uttered but which still seem to be awaiting another day, a day when the fullness of their meaning and significance will be realised. So last week, in chapter 29, Isaiah's 'the meek shall obtain fresh joy in the Lord, and the neediest people shall exult in the Holy One of Israel', sounds like a foresight of or perhaps an inspiration for the one who uttered 'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth' and 'Blessed are you who are poor for yours is the kingdom of God.' And again, the prophet declared that, 'On that day the deaf shall hear the words of a scroll, and out of the gloom and darkness the eyes of the blind shall see' – a reminder if we need it that the healings of Jesus, such as those of the deaf and the blind, were not just neat tricks but were signs, they spoke of what was going on at a deeper level in his ministry – people who couldn't hear the good news, were beginning to hear; people who were couldn't see what was really going on were having their eyes opened. Isaiah too doesn't just mean things literally: they won't just hear the words of a scroll, the words of their ancient Law, but they will hear their meaning and their challenge; out of the gloom and darkness of ignorance they will be delivered as they see, they get it, they understand.

So to today's passage but before that a bit of background. The scholars think that last week's passage goes back to the late 8<sup>th</sup> century BC when the prophet Isaiah first saw visions and received messages at the end of the reign of King Uzziah until his probable end during the reign of Hezekiah. Today's passage is of a different literary style and seems to presume a place in the history of Israel some 150 or more years later when the people of Judah had been taken into exile in Babylon. There is a solid chunk of the book of Isaiah that has the same sort of poetry, imagery, vocabulary and theology, if you like, chapters 40-55. Now there are two ways of explaining this: the first is that the eighth century prophet miraculously lived through to the 6<sup>th</sup> century, perhaps to the age of 200 or more. You may not be surprised to know that scholars have come up with another suggestion – that Isaiah's words, his message and perhaps we could say his tradition was passed on to generations of disciples who both preserved his words but also added to them, not just as a bit of literary editorship but as inhabiting Isaiah's tradition, seeing the word through his eyes but having a fresh calling, new visions, new divine encounters.

As an illustration of this I don't think I can better the illustration I passed on to you over ten years ago now, that of Mrs Beeton, the Delia Smith of Victorian England. Her writings continued to develop and expand in the twentieth century even though she died in 1865! Her books on household management and cookery went through endless editions and revisions. Ten years ago I found on the web 'The best of Mrs Beeton's Easy Everyday Cooking' – and in the blurb:

'Our Mrs Beeton's - Easy Everyday Cooking includes the 200 best recipes including many soups, fish, poultry, meat and vegetable dishes, fully updated (even including microwave tips) as well as sections on sauces, dressing etc.'

She has never gone out of print. Indeed there seems to be a resurgence of interest in Mrs Beeton in our own day. That includes the production of modern editions of her original work – and the reader comments on Amazon are interesting: while they say 'don't try her recipes for home medicines', understandably, many found her original recipes a revelation and the personality that shines through is far from the stern Victorian matron one might expect.

There is continuity across the two hundred years of the prophetic Mrs Beeton of ancient Israel, together with a new poetic quality of expression –

Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened,  
and the ears of the deaf unstopped;  
then the lame shall leap like a deer,  
and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy.

Like John the Baptist, a prophet of 700 years later, this prophet is intimately acquainted with the wilderness; perhaps he too lived there and received his visions and messages there. The wilderness is the setting of today's prophecy as well as the longer section beginning at chapter 40. Just as deafness and blindness for the prophet is metaphorical, so the wilderness motif and all its natural life becomes a metaphor of all that the people of Judah were experiencing and were about to experience as they were to return from exile:

The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad,  
the desert shall rejoice and blossom;  
like the crocus it shall blossom abundantly,  
and rejoice with joy and singing.

For waters shall break forth in the wilderness,  
and streams in the desert;  
the burning sand shall become a pool,  
and the thirsty ground springs of water;  
the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp,  
the grass shall become reeds and rushes.

A highway shall be there,  
and it shall be called the Holy Way;  
the unclean shall not travel on it,  
but it shall be for God's people;

Miracles do happen in deserts; after months of drought, heat and lifelessness comes the rain and streams flow that bring to life what had seemed to be dead or dying. Our prophet is like a David Attenborough in his familiarity with the natural world around him, but his interest is not just in natural history but in the future of his exiled people. The desert provides a parable of their future. And here, of course, Y-sh-a-yah is rather like Yah-sh-ua, the one who spoke of a coming Kingdom that is like seed that is sown in the ground, fish in the sea, birds of the air, sheep in the field. The world around becomes our teacher. 'Consider the lilies of the field'.

We are in the season when the worldwide church has committed itself to consider Creation; in coming weeks, with the help of Isaiah, of course, we will be considering our care of creation and

giving thanks for the fruits of creation. Today on Education Sunday we allow creation to be our teacher, just as Jesus and his prophetic predecessor did. So why not take time this week to allow creation to be your teacher – or, should we say, to allow the Creator to speak to you through what he has made. Consider the lilies, take a stroll through the grassy places or the wastelands. Listen to what you can hear, look for what you might see. Ah yes, for then indeed maybe the eyes of the blind shall be opened and the ears of the deaf unstopped.