

Isaiah 61:1-6

The people of the Prophet Isaiah's time suffered terribly. Foreigners invaded their country and forced them to pay tribute. Their rulers were evil men. Then the country was invaded by the Babylonians and the Jewish King was led away in shackles. Their temple was looted. The population did detestable things, defiling the temple of the Lord. They so angered the Lord that finally He brought back the Babylonians who killed their young men. Young and old, men and women, none were spared. A remnant who escaped the sword was carried into exile. The city of Jerusalem and its temple were destroyed and the people cried.

The little group that remained felt crushed, fearful and hopeless. Though they did not deserve it, God did not forget His promises and He had mercy upon this downtrodden people. He caused His prophet Isaiah to write these words which form our text for today. They are words of comfort and of hope.

Besides comforting the ancient Jewish people these words have a deeper spiritual meaning. They were intended for people of all times, for you and for me. There are many things in our lives that can discourage a believer and threaten his faith. He has his sins. He knows he should live a chaste and decent life. He knows He should love God and his neighbor but he fails miserably. There are so many temptations. The devil, the world and one's sinful nature conspire to destroy faith. Another thing that gets God's people down is all the injustice and wickedness in the world around them. Each has his own disappointments and heartbreaks, sicknesses and losses. Finally death is drawing ever nearer.

Out of His wonderful kindness God sent these words that we are studying today to bring comfort to His suffering people. Listen now to the Good News from the Lord's Servant. His words bring joy to the suffering believer and hope to His Church.

We read, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon Me, because the Lord has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor.

Who is this One speaking? Other passages from Isaiah tell us it is the one called the Servant of the Lord. This Servant is a branch sprung from Jesse's stump, a descendant of King David. He is to bring justice to the nations and to sustain the weary and free the captives.

Who is this Servant of the Lord? It is the Lord Jesus. He was anointed with the Holy Spirit at His baptism. We know that it is Jesus alone who is spoken of in this prophecy because of an incident that took place early in His ministry. Jesus went to His home town Nazareth and on the Sabbath day He went to the synagogue as was His custom. He stood up to read. The scroll of the Prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He turned to the place of our text and He read, "The Spirit of the Lord is on Me because He has anointed Me to preach good news to the poor.' He continued with the quotation. Then He rolled up the scroll, gave it back and said to the people, "Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Isaiah's words were not intended only to comfort the Jews, they were intended for God's people of the New Testament as well. They had spiritual meaning.

The Lord's Servant- Jesus- was sent to bring good news. The Jews needed some good news and you and I who are strangers in this sinful world also need good news to keep us believing. It is an invitation to all people to hear, believe and be comforted.

The message is intended for the poor. People who realize that they are sinners and that they have nothing to offer God but their sinfulness are poor. As the hymn "Rock of Ages" confesses, "Nothing in my hand I bring, only to Thy cross I cling." These words are intended for the broken hearted, that is, those who are ashamed and weep as did Peter after He had denied His Lord. It is for those who have been held captive by sin, the devil, death and hell. It is to give light to spiritually blind prisoners. That Good News is the message of the forgiveness of sins. Picture people bound with a rope around their necks being beaten and dragged to their deaths. That is an illustration of people bound in their sins and being dragged to hell by the devil. The Servant of the Lord not only proclaims the Good News. He is the Good News. What is it that gives peace and comfort? It is the message that they have God's pardon and that He smiles upon them. It is the assurance that they have the forgiveness of sins and everlasting life through the blood and merit of the Savior.

There is a beautiful picture of that pardon in this text. The Savior proclaims the year of the Lord's favor. That would be the year of jubilee. In the Law of Moses God commanded Israel to celebrate a year of jubilee. This occurred every fifty years. In that year all debts were forgiven. All servants were set free and all land that had been sold was returned to its original owner. It was a year of forgiveness. The year of jubilee for God's people lasts forever.

Notice that the time of jubilee lasts for a year but the text speaks only of a day of vengeance. The Lord would rather forgive than to punish. Yet those who reject this Good News must be told, "He that does not believe will be damned."

The Servant of the Lord brought freedom. His message of forgiveness is intended to bring comfort to all who grieve and mourn.

Please take note of how the Lord describes the change that the Christ brings to His people. He comes to bestow a crown of beauty instead of ashes. Years ago people expressed their sorrow by putting ashes upon their heads. The Lord takes away sorrow and replaces it with crown of beauty. He gives oil of gladness instead of mourning. When people celebrated, they would anoint themselves with perfumed oil. The Good News of forgiveness causes people to rejoice. As long as one lives in guilt and fear, he is in despair. Once He is set free, assured of God's forgiveness and goodwill he soars as a bird set free from a trap. He is clothed with praise to God Who has had mercy on Him.

This message of forgiveness makes people oaks of righteousness. The oak tree is tough and strong. Covered with the Lord's righteousness, acceptable to God because of Jesus righteousness the believer will be able to stand in every storm of life and also in God's judgment.

Those who believe do not bring themselves to faith and do not create their own comfort. They are like seedlings that the Lord has planted. They are a display of His goodness that brings Him praise.

This beautiful prophecy of Isaiah also foretells the future of God's Church.

"They will rebuild the ancient ruins and restore the places long desolated. They will renew the ruined cities that have been devastated for generations." These words gave hope to the captive people of Israel. The Lord had not forgotten them. Someday they would go home. It says to the New Testament Church that he has not forgotten her. While she is in this world she is the church militant. She is always under attack. She is attacked by false teachers and quarrels from within. The world is not her friend for she often

suffers persecution. It is a battle to carry out her work, sometimes it is a battle just to continue to exist. However, as the Lord did not forget the Jews but brought them again to their homes, He will not forget His Church but will come and take her home.

Even more astonishing for the Jewish believers was the message that the Church would one day include the gentiles. Gentiles who once persecuted God's people, who did not know God would be gathered in. Aliens will shepherd your flocks, foreigners will work your fields and vineyards. Consider the beauty of the scene. See people from Asia and Europe, Africa and North and South America flow together to become the people of God. God's people are to lift up the eyes of faith and see people from afar, people like the Wise Men, from the nations bringing their treasures to support the Church and glorify the Lord.

The Church will be called priests of the Lord. In the Old Testament the priesthood was limited to the tribe of Levi. In the New Testament all believers are called priests of God. As priests they offer up deeds of love and praise to the Lord and all of them are pleased to be called servants of God doing his work on earth.

As long as one is without the vision that this text gives, he has every reason to be pessimistic. What is life but a march to the grave and whatever lies beyond in the judgment. However, the Good News Jesus brings gives us spiritual vision so that now we have the assurance of forgiveness and joyful hope. This day Isaiah's prophecy has been fulfilled in our hearing. Jesus, the Anointed One has come to us today and proclaimed peace and freedom and the assurance of a glorious future. Believe Him and thank Him. Amen.