

The Good News of Deliverance

61 The spirit of the Lord GOD is upon me,
because the LORD has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the LORD, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.

⁸ For I the LORD love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^[a]
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.
⁹ Their descendants shall be known among the nations,
and their offspring among the peoples;
all who see them shall acknowledge
that they are a people whom the LORD has blessed.
¹⁰ I will greatly rejoice in the LORD,
my whole being shall exult in my God;
for he has clothed me with the garments of salvation,
he has covered me with the robe of righteousness,
as a bridegroom decks himself with a garland,
and as a bride adorns herself with her jewels.
¹¹ For as the earth brings forth its shoots,
and as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up,
so the Lord GOD will cause righteousness and praise
to spring up before all the nations.

Hear the Gospel of our Lord Jesus Christ according to John

There was a man sent from God, whose name was John. ⁷ He came as a witness to testify to the light, so that all might believe through him. ⁸ He himself was not the light, but he came to testify to the light.

¹⁹ This is the testimony given by John when the Jews sent priests and Levites from Jerusalem to ask him, "Who are you?" ²⁰ He confessed and did not deny it, but confessed, "I am not the Messiah."^[a] ²¹ And they asked him, "What then? Are you Elijah?" He said, "I am not." "Are you the prophet?" He answered, "No." ²² Then they said to him, "Who are you? Let us have an answer for those who sent us. What do you say about yourself?" ²³ He said,

"I am the voice of one crying out in the wilderness,
'Make straight the way of the Lord,'"

as the prophet Isaiah said.

²⁴ Now they had been sent from the Pharisees. ²⁵ They asked him, "Why then are you baptizing if you are neither the Messiah,^[a] nor Elijah, nor the prophet?" ²⁶ John answered them, "I baptize with water. Among you stands one whom you do not know, ²⁷ the one who is coming after me; I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal." ²⁸ This took place in Bethany across the Jordan where John was baptizing.

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I expect that many of you know the book by C.S. Lewis called the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe. Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy, go through a wardrobe one day and find themselves in a land where it is always winter, but never Christmas.

It is a land of both wonders and danger, with talking animals who befriend them and teach them about their mysterious land. To the surprise of the children, they find that they themselves have been part of the mythology of Narnia, for many generations.

In the warmth of the beavers' cave, away from the dangers of the forest, the children learn about the ancient prophecy.

*"When Adam's flesh and Adams bone
Sits at Cair Paravel in throne
The evil time will be over and done"*

They cannot believe that the prophecy refers to them. They are not, they point out to Mr Beaver, in the film associated with the book, heroes. They are just children. They are not great warriors from another world – they are just ordinary people from Finchley.

Which is, perhaps, entirely the point.

Just as the children are called to work with Aslan to usher in the new age, so we are called, like John the Baptist, and Isaiah before him, to prepare the way for Christ in our own time. The temptation is to say "Who? Me?" and to duck out of the limelight and to look for someone more heroic or more clever or with more theological education – but if we do, then the opportunity is lost. For there are

no heroes and there are no champions for Christ's love, apart from ordinary people like us.

Today we acknowledge of our Churchwardens - the people who generously take the responsibility for our fabric and our property, who work with myself and the Bishop and, as the admission liturgy says "to be an example and encouragement to their fellow Christians and the wider community; and to promote unity and peace". Just like the rest of us, they have, I am sure, thought "Who? Me?" at certain times, and yet they have followed God's calling, at cost of time and energy and commitment, and have agreed to continue to do so in this most difficult of years.

I would like to urge you to pray regularly for our Churchwardens and to do everything you can to support them. The calling of some does not let the rest of us off the hook. All are called, all are chosen. Your Churchwardens need their Church councils to be engaged and for each member of their congregations to consider what their calling is in the life of the Church. It is together that we are the Church, and together that we are called to bring Christ's light into the world.

Our two readings today are about calling and vocation. The prophet in our Old Testament reading from the book of Isaiah knows that he has been called by God and he is not afraid to speak God's words to the people. "The Spirit of the Lord is upon me" he calls out, "And he has sent me to bring good news to the poor". His news is practical – it makes a difference to the down trodden and despairing. It is news of a new world order where the last will be first, where they will no longer be abused or neglected or mocked. Where the depressed will find new hope, and those who mourn will find courage and strength. Where ruins will be built up into newer brighter cities, and where winter will finally give way to spring.

Well, we probably don't identify very strongly with either Isaiah or John the Baptist to be honest. Not many of us would feel comfortable with making quite as many enemies as they did, in their steadfast determination to share God's truth. They are heroes of the faith – perhaps quite odd heroes really (especially John). Wearing hair shirts and eating locust and honey and shouting loudly at passers by caused quite a bit of consternation even in first century Palestine – and thankfully, I think it is unlikely

that God is calling us to be quite as odd as they were. But God does call us - in good times, and in hard times, and often out of our comfort zone.

For all of us, at this moment in time, in this season, our calling is to continue to proclaim that God is with us. Never have we needed Christmas more - not the tinsel and the trees and the presents - though they can bring us much needed relief and joy - rather, we have never needed that promise more - that God is with us - God is on his way - that in Jesus we can discern some light, even on the darkest days, and that God has promised that he will always be with us, holding our hand and showing us the path to life. You are all a part of God's gift to the world - you all hold something of the light of Christ within you.

Because Jesus is born each day within his people. He is found in the hope of a new start that each day offers us. Though we are ordinary, fallible children, with ordinary complicated lives, he continually breathes his life into us – loving us into expressing his love to those around us. In the Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe", it is ordinary

children from Finchley who help Aslan to reclaim Narnia. In our own world it will be ordinary people from Aldborough, Boroughbridge, Dunforth, Minskip and Roecliffe who bring to life God's Kingdom here and now.

Extraordinary, but true - each one of us must take up our commission - to work to show the world that God is with us all.

Amen – Come Lord Jesus.

Let us pray,

Faithful God who centres us and calls us on, we thank you for the calling that you make on the lives of each one of us. Bless our endeavours and lead us closer to you. We pray today for all of our Wardens: for Liz and Jamie, Paul and Kath, Jim and Stephen, Fiona and Penny, and Robert, and we thank you for their service to your Church. Help each one of us to support them in their duties and to be faithful to our own vocations. May all our Churches be beacons of hope and life in a world which is often anxious and despairing, and which needs the hope of the light of Christ. May we, your people, fulfil the calling you set

before us, to the glory of your name and for the benefit of our world.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for the communities that we serve, especially tonight giving thanks for all who are supporting the vulnerable at this time of year. We give thanks for the work of Boroughbridge Community Care, all charitable and community organisations, our schools and our businesses and our voluntary groups. We pray for all those who hold authority in our local communities, whether in elected office or by virtue of their profession or in a voluntary capacity. May we work together in discharging our duty for the good of all those whom we serve, to relieve suffering and bring hope to our town and villages

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for our country at this time of medical need and political uncertainty. Grant wisdom and clarity to all in authority, that they may lead with integrity and for the common good. We continue to pray for all who work in

the health services and in medical research, giving thanks for the great strides that are being made and the hope of a brighter year next year. We pray to for our media, that journalism may be undertaken responsibly and for the good of all.

Lord in your mercy, Hear our prayer

We pray for our world, especially for all those who live in countries where the pandemic has merely added to their suffering. We pray for those who are victims of war or unjust regimes, for those who go hungry, for those who are unable to access any medical treatment. We ask for God's mercy where we have been complicit in maintaining an unfair world, and we ask for a more equitable distribution of the world's resources.

Lord in your mercy,
Hear our prayer

We pray for those in our own communities who are suffering today: for those who have been the most isolated and lonely of the past year, for those who have been the most anxious, for those who have struggled to manage their disappointments, for those for whom home is not a

safe place, for those whose physical health has disintegrated, and those who grieve and who have not been able to have closure. Heavenly Father, your light comes at Christmas into untmost darkness, and you promise that there is nowhere you cannot reach. Heal the broken in Spirit, restore the hopes of those who are despairing, and give us all the joy of your salvation. Help us to be your hands and your heart here on earth, and to point to your light and your ever present love. As we turn our faces towards Christ, who is the light on our horizon, let us pray together with confidence as our Saviour taught us

Our Father, who art in heaven,
Hallowed be thy Name.
Thy kingdom come.
Thy will be done,
On earth as it is in heaven.
Give us this day our daily bread.
And forgive us our trespasses,
As we forgive those who trespass against us.
And lead us not into temptation,
But deliver us from evil.
For thine is the kingdom, the power, and the glory,
for ever and ever. Amen