

### Advent 3 (MP-2) (2019)

Our focus this morning is on ‘ministers of the Gospel’ . . . those who bring glad tidings.

As I begin, may I ask you to think back in your own life of ‘ministers of the Gospel’ who aided your spiritual growth and development.

If you grew up in a Christian home and went to church, likely there will be one or more who made a real impact on your life, godly souls who stand out.

Of course, there may be one or more who didn’t measure up, who was a rotten egg.

Put such ones aside – if you can. Give their case over to the Lord, and think rather of the ones who were faithful and kindled a flame of fire in your heart and set you on the right path.

Before I pass on let me say that even the most faithful were not perfect. There is only one perfect shepherd, and that is Jesus Christ. So, don’t put any man on too high of a pedestal.

At the end of the day, we all – as the Bible tells us – are ‘unprofitable servants’.

The amazing thing is that because our God is a big God He can and does use broken vessels to bring about His purposes of good.

So, don’t make idols out of ministers of the Gospel, but do esteem them very high in the Lord.

Let their words and example continue to guide you. Be served by their ministry.

In my own life, I can think of several who influenced and helped form me. One was W. Benton Preston, the minister under whom I grew up.

The year before he died, out of the blue, he called me up one morning to say that out of all the young people who had grown up in our local church, he thought he was the proudest of me.

Needless to say, I was both flattered and humbled by his words.

Forty years had passed since I had sat under his ministry, yet there he was still praying for me and encouraging me.

He has now gone to be with the Lord. Yet, he still speaks to me, and I give thanks for his life of faithful ministry.

Another is the Rev. Robert Lee Saul, rector of the church from which I was sent off to theological college.

On several occasions, he gently nudged me in the direction of seeking ordination. I don't think I even recognized it at the time, but in retrospect, I see what he was doing. I give thanks to him this morning.

We usually think of 'ministers of the Gospel' as being those who lived after Christ. Not so, though. There were those who lived before.

One such person was Isaiah, whose words we read for our Old Testament lesson this morning.

The book that bears this prophet's name has been called the *Fifth Gospel*. Why?

Well, because it contains 'good tidings'. "Good tidings", is, of course, the meaning of 'gospel'.

In Isaiah's case, he is a proto-type of a Minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He brought good news to the people of his day and beyond. He spoke of Christ and the blessings that He would bring.

In today's reading, he delivers his good news in almost cinematic fashion, flashing – as it were -- five pictures across a screen.

In case you did not pick up on these five pictures. Allow me highlight them for you.

The first is **a desert being transformed into a garden of flowers.**

**“The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose,”** he writes.

God’s ancient people had spent a lot of time in and around arid regions.

Remember their trek from Egypt to the Promised Land during the days of Moses. Also remember that wilderness lay all around them in the Land of Promise. To the south, for example, was the region around the Dead Sea, a place of rocks and little else.

So, they knew a lot about parched ground, limited vegetation, barren land.

Isaiah’s words were very evocative. He pictures a wilderness being transformed into a garden of flowers.

The second picture is of **a dispirited group of people, perhaps soldiers, being given an infusion of new courage and confidence.** To them comes the message:

**“Say to them that are of a fearful heart, “Be strong, fear not: behold, your God will come . . . and save you.”**

They may be at their wits’ end, but their God remained steady and on task.

Third picture: **handicapped people being given healed and transformed bodies:**

**“The eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf shall be unstopped.”**

What a wonderful picture that is! We all, I dare say, know people at this very moment who need transformed bodies. Perhaps we need them ourselves. The good news is new bodies are coming.

Fourth picture: **Another scene depicting the renewal the cosmos.**

In his first vision the prophet sees flowers blooming in the desert. Now, he sees streams breaking out of dry ground. No more thirst.

Think of Jesus' words to the woman at the well in Samaria: I will give you living water. Those who drink of this water will never thirst again. Isaiah saw this day coming. Good news!

Fifth picture: a raised highway with no ravenous beasts along the way, one that allows God's people to go up to Zion and her Temple in safety and peace with songs of joy on their lips.

Put these five pictures together, and you have GOSPEL, good news.

But the question is: When will these images take concrete form?

In answering this question, let me begin by saying that prophecy in the Bible is like an onion in the sense it often has a number of layers.

In this case, the pictures Isaiah flashes on the screen point forward to the deliverance God would send to His exiled people off in Babylon. This deliverance would come over a century later.

God was going to raise up for them a highway so that they might go home.

But, there is a second layer of this onion of prophecy.

The pictures the prophet flashes on the screen also point forward to the coming of a new King out of David's line, the One whose birth we shall soon celebrate at Christmas.

When Jesus came, what did He do? He caused the lame to walk. He gave sight to the blind. He raised the dead. He wiped away tears from people's eyes. To the widow of Nain, He said: Weep not.

These were more than one-of great wonders or miracles. They were signs that God's kingdom – His right rule – had arrived on sin-plagued Planet earth. God was doing something new. The deserts were beginning to blossom.

But there is still a third and final layer of this onion. The pictures Isaiah flashes on that screen ultimately point forward to the time when Jesus will come again.

At that time: No more tears. No more death. New restored bodies. A renewed cosmos. God's right order restored.

Though he lived **Before Christ**, Isaiah was a true minister of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. He brought glad tidings of Jesus.

Today we remember and celebrate his ministry, but not his ministry alone.

Rather, as I have already suggested, we focus on all ministers of the Gospel, those who lived in times past as well as those alive today

Give thanks for those who brought you the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Continue to be led by their word and example.

Pray for all who minister in this place and those who minister throughout the world. Pray that they may be faithful and honourable servants of God in a world where that is often difficult.

Pray that God will raise up many faithful souls to serve in the ordained ministry of the Church.

And finally, never forget that all baptised people in some sense are called to be ministers of the Gospel.

Now, mind you, I am not saying all baptised people ought to be ordained. Rather, I am saying everyone – ordained or lay – have good news to share.

I am reminded of a line from that old Negro spiritual that says;

**“If you cannot preach like Peter or pray like Paul, you can tell the love of Jesus and say he died for all.”**

That's it in a nutshell.

Resolve to publish glad tidings.

“The desert shall rejoice, and blossom as the rose,” and we all have a part to play in making this happen. Hallelujah! Let us be about our task.