

TRUST THE HERALD

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11

John 1:6-8, 19-28

“Oyez, Oyez!”

I don't suppose Stow/Heriot ever had a town crier: for that you have to be a town. In a village the grapevine system is often perfectly sufficient for getting news out. But many Scottish towns used to have a crier and some still do, though mainly for ceremonial occasions. I should think that our nearest one might have been in Edinburgh or maybe in Selkirk. You can imagine him coming to the market cross, to the castle gates, to the gates of the city, to all the prominent places in the town and making his announcements:

“Good cooked tripe to be had at Maggie Hendrie's!” “Sugar loaves for sale at tomorrow's market!” “The Queen is delivered safely of a baby boy!” “Taxes are to rise by two pennies in the pound!” “The army is defeated on Flodden field!” “King James has safely reached London!” All sorts of announcements - good news and bad, of national importance or simply of local interest, news for the housewife as well as news for the governing classes. All came from the mouth of the one town crier, and no one knew what he would tell them until he opened his mouth.

The thing about the Crier was that he (or she) simply must be trusted. If even once the Crier gave out false information, whether good or bad, then he would never be trusted again. That is why the person of the Crier came under direct protection of the crown, because sometimes the saying “Don't shoot the messenger” could be literally appropriate.

The messenger had to be trusted. John the Baptist was the town crier, the herald for Jesus' first coming. He wasn't the light but the witness to the light. He wasn't the Messiah, but the one who told people that he was coming, who got them ready for him, who pointed him out. And he could be trusted. His lifestyle showed that he wasn't in it for what he could get out of it. He didn't try to claim to be something that he was not. He was a faithful herald.

Jesus once preached from this passage which we read in Isaiah. At least, it doesn't seem to have been much of a sermon. He was in the synagogue in Nazareth and was asked to read. He chose this passage (or maybe it was chosen for him) and he read it out then he said “Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.” (Luke 4:21). It had been fulfilled. He was the one who could truly say these words. *“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me [has chosen me, has set me apart]; he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour, and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn....”* This was Jesus' manifesto, and, unlike some politicians who seem to see a manifesto as an infinitely flexible statement, Jesus could be trusted to deliver it.

Notice how much there is in this statement about sorrow. The prophet mentions the broken-hearted, those who mourn, faint and heavy spirits. So many different terms for what we might call generic sadness: sadness caused by different things. The causes don't matter here: what matters is that people are sad. God, and so Jesus, and so the

writers of the Bible don't shy away from naming life as it is, and for all of us at times, and for some of us most of the time, it seems that life is sad.

Wait a minute, though. We are in Advent, and Christmas is just around the corner. What are we doing taking about sadness? Surely Christmas is a time for joy? Yes, it is, for joy: for that knowledge that deep down everything has changed for the better; for the joy of having hope no matter what the circumstances, because God is with us. "*He has clothed me with the garments of salvation, he has covered me with the robe of righteousness*" (Isaiah 61:10) says the prophet. That is the joy of Christmas. But too often there is pressure put on us to be, not joyful, but frantically, frenetically happy. We are asked to be hilarious, and if we don't feel that way, we are asked to pretend that we do.

We don't need to have any part in a false hilarity. As Christians, those whose lives have been changed by God coming among us, being with us, there are times when our joy is boundless, and breaks out in hilarity and fun and general happiness. There are times when your feet want to dance and your voice to sing, and your face to grin and go on grinning. But this is not always and it is not to order. Feelings are feelings and all sorts of things affect them.

The prophet acknowledges this, he knows that often people are in various ways sad, and it is to our sadness that he brings a real and lasting hope. Jesus knew this too, which is why he took this section of prophecy as his manifesto.

A manifesto is a list of things which you promise you will do, it is not just a list of aspirations - or it's not supposed to be. When Jesus adopted Isaiah's words as his manifesto he was also adopting them as a programme of work for himself, and for his followers. Jesus could be trusted to keep his word. As his followers we too need to be trusted to keep his and ours. We too need to be those who bring relief to those who are in sorrow of one kind or another. We too need to be those who help the oppressed and the imprisoned. And this means practical action.

Advent is the beginning of the Christian year, when we ready ourselves for Christmas, yes, but also for the year ahead. This is the time to ready ourselves to take practical action to be with those who are sad and just need to know that someone else knows it and cares.

This is the time to begin to take practical action to show love to the lonely or those who have dropped through the bottom of society and have lost their own sense of value.

This is the time to speak for the voiceless and hidden, who are behind bars - whether in Guantanamo or Saughton or Dungavel.

This is the time to begin to open doors for those who are trapped by circumstance: to help care for those who are becoming less able, to relieve those who are already giving full time care.

This is the time to begin again to lead people into praise for our God: praise which lifts the heavy Spirit and gives strength to the faint-hearted; which reminds people of God's work to make oaks of righteousness and to build up the devastations of faith in the past generations. This is the time, the time to start - so long as we don't think that Christmas marks the time to stop!!

Oyez called the Town Crier - which comes from distorted French and means

“hear ye”. “Oyez called John the Baptist - or words to that effect, as he pointed to Jesus. “Oyez” called Jesus as he declared himself on the side of those who are sorrowful or oppressed. Oyez calls the church - or she should do if she is worth her salt, worthy of the title “Church”.

God says “*I, the Lord, love justice, I hate robbery and wrongdoing.*” (Isaiah 61:8) We who call ourselves the church are known in heaven as the children of God. And if we are God’s children, then surely we should show in our behaviour that we love what he loves - justice - and hate what he hates - wrongdoing or hypocrisy (one translation of that phrase is that God hates “robbery with a burnt offering). If we are to be heralds of Jesus’ coming, of the truth that Jesus is Emmanuel - God with us - of Jesus’ coming again, then we have to show that we too can be trusted.

All of us have the heritage of herald-hood. If we know the truth then we are to speak it, to live it, to make sure it is heard, loud and clear: and it will only be heard if, like the town criers of old, people know that they can trust the messenger.

We are to show that we know the truth about humanity, its frailty and fallibility - by caring for the weak, and forgiving those who fail us.

We are to show that we know the truth about God, by living lives which are different, in which time and energy is given to the worship of God, in which prayer and service have a prominent part.

We are to show that we know the truth about Jesus, by helping people to see beyond the sentimentality with which we love to surround the Christmas stories.

The good news about Jesus is good simply because it is rooted in reality. It acknowledges the problems we have, the pains we endure the things which worry and frighten us. And to this reality God sent Jesus with his practical aid. To this reality Jesus sends his followers, to be heralds who point to him, and to prepare for him by bringing his presence into the pains of the world in practical ways.

God grant that, like Jesus, we adopt Isaiah’s words as our manifesto and programme of works. Amen.