

Hymns:	88	"Praise to the Lord, the Almighty the king of creation"
	20	"Be still for the presence of the Lord"
	736	"In heavenly love abiding"
	550	"Forth in thy name O Lord I go"
	661	"Glorious things of thee are spoken"

Readings: Isaiah 43.1-7, Luke 3.15-17, 21-22

Let us pray.

May God bless our meditations on these words, and send the Holy Spirit to enliven our hearts and minds by their hearing.

We ask this in the name of Jesus Christ,

AMEN.

"And the Holy Spirit descended upon him in bodily form like a dove, And a voice came from heaven, 'You are my Son, the Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.'"

Beloved... With you I am well-pleased.

1. Introduction: baptism and the lessons of Isaiah

It seems a good thing to be talking about fresh starts and new beginnings now, on the 13th of January, when we've all had time to get over our New Years' resolutions and slip back into all our old bad habits.

And we stand at the beginning of a momentous week in our politics, our public life – a week whose impact and effect on our economy, especially those in the least powerful places of our economy, will likely be felt for a generation. And the voice of our public discourse has become more shrill, more divided. Whether we have Brexit or not, whether a new referendum or a deal or not, we have lost social capital.

And we stand after a week when the Congolese election is disputed, when the USA is still in partial federal shut down – wars and rumours of wars. On our watch.

And in church the decorations are put away, the Covenant service is over and done with for another year, we're finished with Christmas hymns, and things are getting back to normal.

I have never felt a division between evangelical Christian spirituality and public service, social holiness, as John Wesley called it. And how we are formed as people, how we hold ourselves as disciples of Christ is fundamental to how we engage in our public life. Am I tempted to be defensive as church, spoiling for a fight, defending our patch against the

world? Am I tempted to withdraw, doing church well perhaps but privatising our faith? Our prophets are speaking to the world – Isaiah didn't mean the boundary of his voice to be at any church door.

So it is now, that we as a church come to the baptism of Jesus, and to these extraordinary passages in Isaiah.

We recognise in the sacrament of Baptism that we each have been washed clean and claimed by God, beloved. If we were baptised as babies this means too that we were claimed by a very real, fallible and human Christian community, and means that we still choose to throw in our disciple lot with this very real, fallible human community.

We know that this promise of new life, this claim of God in our lives continues however removed we are now in years or experience from the actual event.

God speaks this great affirmation 'with you I am well pleased' to Jesus before Jesus actually does any good deeds or ministry – the affirmation attaches to who Jesus is, not to what he has done, or will do. God names him 'my son,' as God names each of us, beloved.

All of this we claim. So we too are challenged to open our hearts to receive again the Spirit, and to hear the words 'with you I am well-pleased:' not because of what we have done, or what we continue to do, but because of who we are.

But the lectionary readings this week push our understanding of what it is to be 'beloved' deeper. In the reading from Isaiah, God speaks to a people in exile in a strange land, a people who feels abandoned, cast off, anything but 'beloved.'

We need the confidence of being beloved to greet the world with vulnerable engagement, not either with defensiveness not with self protective withdrawal. A contemporary way of expressing this sense of being beloved is 'you are enough' – just as we are, we are offered. And we are enough.

As we look at this passage from Isaiah, the promises God makes suggest three lessons to tell us more about what it is to be 'beloved by God,' and what it is to throw our lot in together in a covenantal community as God's people.

They are potentially hard edged lessons – they should convict as they also comfort us. Indeed they teach us that God's love for us is and will continue to be as uncompromising as it is intimate.

1. First Lesson: we may act yet as if in exile

The first lesson suggested by the Isaiah is that although we are redeemed, we are people who still sometime behave as if we were in exile.

The people to whom God is talking in the text are a people torn from their homes and temple culture and made refugees, conquered and deported into the land of Babylon. They

are described in the chapter immediately preceding our passage as ‘robbed and plundered, trapped in holes and hidden in prisons.’

So the promises made by God are made to a fearful people, a people who would have every reason to distrust the promise of protective safety.

How many times, in how many small ways do we allow ourselves even unknowingly to make choices based on fear – fear of genuine hard things we know are coming. Fear of failing, or being made or actually becoming redundant; fear of illness, fear of losing someone we love, or of leaving someone who loves us.

Even in small things, fear is a remarkably effective motivator: ask any student doing exams. It moves us like nothing else... BUT God’s grace. (Beloved, with you I am well-pleased.) And our fear is a commodity – bought and sold, farmed – nurtured to make us pliable. Fear of the other, of catastrophe, of loss.

When we act in fear we act as if we were still in exile, when we act in fear we behave as if we actually WERE abandoned in whatever strange land Babylon has become in our lives. We hide from the cleansing and healing love of God present to us in friends and community.

Do not fear, for I have redeemed you; Do not fear, for I am with you: while the second part of these statements may be a comforting promise to us, the first part is a command. Not for nothing is this command not be afraid one of the most common in the whole body of our Scripture.

SO in deepening our understanding of what it is to be beloved, the first lesson of this passage from Isaiah is that we do not have to live as if we were in exile any longer. Give up your fearful struggles, give up, give in, and come home, says GOD.

2. Second Lesson: the hard trials of life are real

The second lesson of the text is that along our way the trials will be real.

Yes, we are named and redeemed by God, but that doesn’t mean that the waters won’t rise and the fires not burn around us. It doesn’t mean that we won’t be afraid, despite our best efforts. It doesn’t mean that we don’t hesitate, or even that we don’t feel broken by things that happen in our lives.

What it means is that we will never be alone. That as we lay hands on and in each others’ lives in Christian community, as we repeat the promises and say the prayers for hopeful re-creation once again, as we let the heavens tear open and see the dove of spirit descend on us, together we are walking God’s homecoming way.

Even as a homecoming, beloved people we don’t get to skip the trials of the journey – any more than Jesus did immediately after his Baptism, when filled by the spirit, that same spirit led him into the wilderness.

Trials are real. Just as Jesus was really hungry in the wilderness – really tempted – the greatest faith doesn't pay the rent or find a new job if we get made redundant.

But the trials of our way, whether they be great losses or just ordinary built up disappointments and half-hopes of our lives do not define who or how valuable we are. Despite the value the world may try to give us, it has no claim on us, no power to name us.

I think here of the old-fashioned school teachers' game of having a balloon vote – we are adrift in the balloon and have to choose who to throw overboard to save the rest – the preacher, the doctor, the skilled engineer, or the little child? Hmm...

3. Third lesson: God will not give us up

This moves us to the third lesson Isaiah offers about what it is to be beloved by God: God has been with us all this way, and nothing will induce God to give us up.

The world may try to seduce us into naming ourselves by our perceived use rather than our being. And oh, how seductive it might be if we could know we were safe from our brothers and sisters taking up space in the balloon! But no. God's love for us expressed in the water and naming of Baptism, often offered when we are most vulnerable and demanding as babies pre-empts any service, any vocation we might have in this world.

As Yahweh's love is decisive in the life of the nation of Israel, so Yahweh's love is the decisive thing for us. It points us toward who we really are, and transforms our lives of exile into a homecoming journey.

This love re-positions us in relation to hard places, the trials of our lives, and in relation to the world: God is devoted to us, treasures us, in John Calvin's words 'refuses to be deprived' of us.

Out of Isaiah, we learn that the be-loving of God contains both the gentlest mercy and the most uncompromising promise that our lives matter as part of God's triumph over the darkness and chaos that threaten to engulf our world.

(Beloved, with you I am well pleased)

4. Conclusion

So, we read the promises of Isaiah to understand the quality of the 'be-loving' offered in the Gospel. I have suggested that they teach us that we may yet behave as if we are in exile, that the trials of our lives are real, but that we are not alone: in naming and redeeming us God refuses to give us up.

I find these unsettling lessons: prophetic, as they convict and challenge, but also comforting in the real healing and reconciliation they offer. This week, fires will burn, waters will rise – different people will invite you to panic and to run scared for the hills. Resist. Do not let anyone take from you the power of compassion, of wisdom, of truth telling to power.

In the words of the Psalm the voice of the Lord still thunders over the waters. God's promises shake the wilderness places of our lives and strip their forests bare. And here in God's temple, all say GLORY.

Glory be to God the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit, as it was in the beginning, is now, and will be forever. AMEN.