

Third Sunday of Advent, rcl yr a, 2020
St. John's Kitchener at home
Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11; Psalm 126; 1 Thess. 5:16-24; John 1:6-8, 19-28

*to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit*

Instead. It's a word we hear three times in this passage from Isaiah.
Instead. Easy to miss, right? Hardly the most important of words.

But here in Isaiah it's a bit of a Cinderella word. There are far more glamorous words, all dressed up to go out to the ball like Cinderella's stepsisters, words like *garland*, *gladness*, *praise*. Words like *justice*. (Though they are hardly as evil as Cinderella's stepsisters ...)

Cinderella words, words like *instead*, aren't Cinderella words because they are better than their stepsisters, but because they aren't really all that glamorous, and they don't get much attention either. These are the words that stay at home to do all the difficult work—all the washing up, all the cleaning, and all the laundry—so those other more glamorous words, like Cinderella's stepsisters, can shine and go to the ball.

Instead. It's an important word in this part of Isaiah because it helps us see the difference between how things are and how things will be.

The stage is set for these three *insteads* by the proclamation of the chosen one, the one anointed by the Lord to bring good news to the oppressed; to bind up the broken-hearted; to proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour and the day of vengeance of God. This anointed one will comfort all who mourn—and it's here we hear the *insteads* that do some real theological heavy lifting, but without glamour and the glory. The anointed one will give to all those who mourn: a garland *instead* of ashes, the oil of gladness *instead* of mourning, the mantle of praise *instead* of a faint spirit.

The work done by that little workman of a word, is to describe the difference between what is, and what is to be. Because as hopeful, and even joyful this part of Isaiah is, it wasn't spoken to the most hopeful or joyful of people. It was spoken to a people who were, indeed, in ashes,

in mourning, it was spoken to a people of faint spirits, toiling away far from the things that were so important to them: unable to worship the way they wanted to worship, and unable to live the way they wanted to live.

Israel was a community in exile with very little self-determination as a people, and were subject to powers far bigger than they could overcome or influence. They were a people at the mercy of the whims others.

And so they were a people in ashes, a people in mourning, a people of faint spirit. And it is into those ashes of mourning, and to a people of faint spirit, that another vision is proclaimed by God's chosen one. And it's a word of hope, and even a word joy.

It wasn't though a particularly realistic vision. It was, rather, it a vision of hope against all odds: that in a world of ashes, and to a people in mourning and of faint spirit, we hear this proclamation: *instead* of ashes, there would be garlands; *instead* of mourning, there would be oil of gladness; *instead* of faint spirits, there would be the mantle of praise. It is a proclamation of *justice*: the broken-hearted would be bound up, the captives would be liberated and prisoners released. And there would be a year of the Lord's favour, an economic reset in which the have-nots would receive from those who have, and those who have would redistribute what they have to the have-nots. There would be a jubilee.

And if this proclamation sounds like a pipe-dream, if it sounds like a fantasy, if it sounds like the babbling of a someone who hasn't yet had enough experience of the world to know that such things are impossible after all: God affirms this vision by interrupting this proclamation to speak a Great Big Yes.

Yes! What the chose one of God proclaims with such hope will come true, not because of Israel's merit, nor because it is a plausible reality according to current conditions. The vision of what will be—a garland *instead* ashes, the oil of gladness *instead* of mourning, the mantle of praise *instead* of a faint spirit—even though it all flies in face of real circumstances, this *instead* will come to pass because of *God's* faith and fidelity, because of *God's* constancy and commitment, because of *God's* resolve: "For I the

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Lord love justice ... [and] I *will* faithfully give them their recompense, and I *will* make an *everlasting* covenant with them.”

It was a vision only partially fulfilled in its time. The people were restored to Jerusalem—instead of living exile, people of God found a home. But the call for economic justice—the jubilee, the economic reset in which the have-nots would receive from those who have, and those who have would redistribute what they have to the have-nots—doesn't find its foothold in Jerusalem. But the promise remained, because God is faithful; and God's faithfulness is not conditional, but persists.

And so too in the time of John the Baptist: God is faithful.

It is no small detail that John the Baptist is the voice of one crying out in the wilderness. This was no metaphor for John. He lived in the actual wilderness. But Jerusalem was in the wilderness of its own, occupied by a foreign power, unable to enact God's call to jubilee and economic justice, where the only options seemed to be: to work with the powers that be, join the powers that be, look the other way and pretend there was no injustice, or suffer the wrath of the unjust powers.

Like Israel in exile, hearing the voice of an anointed one that promised more than anyone thought possible, Jerusalem in occupation hears a voice in the wilderness, the voice of a man so committed to justice that he will suffer the wrath of the powers that be and lose his head.

And what does Jerusalem hear from John? God is faithful.

There is one who is coming that is greater than me, and I am but a messenger to prepare his way, says John the Baptist. There is a light in this darkness, says John the Baptist. I am a witness to this light in the darkness, says John the Baptist. And John will bear witness and point out this light in the darkness: the lamb of God that takes away the sins of the world.

John proclaims again another *instead*: instead of me, there is another: I am not worthy to untie the thong of his sandal. And at his Advent,

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instead of darkness, there will be light. *Instead* of lies, there will be truth. *Instead* of exploitation, there will be justice. *Instead* of death, there will be life. So make straight the way of the Lord.

May we too hear this *instead*. Even if it hardly seems possible in the present moment, may we hear: that instead of mourning and faint spirits, there *is* hope, and if instead there is hope, then there is joy too. Because the Advent of Christ the King is upon us, and coming on clouds descending he will set all things right—and not according to our merit, nor because this a plausible reality according to current conditions. But because God says, *instead* of oppression, *instead* of captivity, *instead* of exploitation: justice.

And because of God's faithfulness and fidelity, because of God's constancy and commitment to his people: we will be a people of garlands, of gladness, and of praise; a people of hope, and if hope then a people of joy; because we will be a people of the God who says, "For I the Lord love justice."

The Revd Dr Preston DS Parsons