



## Sermon preached by Revd Nigel Uden on Sunday 3 January 2020

Isaiah 60.1-6; Ephesians 3.1-12; Matthew 2.1-12

Standing at the threshold of a new year, and not least of the one that follows 2020, we might be forgiven for seeking some light to disperse the old year's shadows. Of course, it is a slightly false threshold. Nothing much actually changes just because the day, month and year do. My peccadilloes remain my peccadilloes, the sea remains the sea, ebbing and flowing just as it did four days ago. And the coronavirus remains the coronavirus. As the Prime Minister memorably said, 'The virus ... doesn't know it is Christmas.' That said, false threshold or not, every New Year has a grip on our psyche as a time of new beginning, of renewed hope. And such are the eyes through which we refer to the Scriptures today.

Truth to tell, these passages offer hope, and, why not? The compilers of the lectionary would hardly have selected scriptures for the beginning of the year that sent us hunkering down in fear and anxiety before week one is over!

Isaiah 60 has a real sense of new beginning. In a chapter that some regard as standing alone, without need of what is either side of it, the writer is animated about the salvation that Israel is experiencing. This is no esoteric theological thing, on another plane. It's the salvation of returning from a long, painful exile in Babylon, where they couldn't even sing the Lord's song, so strange, so inhospitable to them was that land. They are even going to rebuild the temple. That iconic place, which is so pregnant with their identity, matters more than words can say. They're home. And what a precious word that is. Home, where we can be who we are. Home, where we know the healing of freedom and forgiveness, of belonging and peace. If that is what salvation is, thanks be to God.

So dramatic is the good news of Israel's salvation that the prophet says, 'Arise! Shine.' Be done with gloom. A new day is dawning. Just before Christmas we heard an earlier Isaiah emphasise *comfort* by repeating it. 'Comfort, O comfort my people.' This time emphasis is given by using two complementary verbs, the second more intense than the first. "*Arise*; get up and enjoy your new start." "*Shine*; let the glory of God beam from you." It so reminds me of my mother, who would habitually burst into my teenage bedroom far too early, fling wide the curtains and far too loudly sing, 'Rise and Shine, darling!'

So this passage grabs our January attention with a promise of release from captivity, and the hope of returning to things we have so treasured before. I wonder in what sense 2021 will be like that. Will the vaccines so redeem the lost days and lives and prosperity of last year that we can Arise and Shine? Will we have that sense of what used to be, wondrously being just as it was once more? Or might we arise and shine because we've learned to be something new as a result of the pandemic? Remember Tony Bottoms quoting the Pope in his paper for last Autumn's Elders' Day: 'We are not living through an era of change, but a change of era. We are entering a new chapter in the history of the world, and of the church. The scale of the challenge before us demands a careful response'. End quote. So, we are not wise unquestioningly to want yesterday back – in the world, in the church or even in our own lives. I'll never have black hair again, and nor should I because it would not be right with everything else I have become. 'Arise, shine,' says the later Isaiah, but we must also listen to an earlier section of this prophecy, hearing the

Lord say: Do not remember the former things; I am about to do a new thing.’ And thanks be to God for that. It’s why we really can arise and shine, because the God we know through Jesus Christ is always about the tomorrow we will inhabit, not the yesterday we’ve left behind. And then we heard the writer of Ephesians offers us something reassuring for the New Year, too. With the church of Ephesus, in what is now Turkey, we’re told we have the unfathomable riches of Christ to preach. This is a reference to the abundant grace of God, sufficient, says Paul elsewhere, for all our needs. Then, a few verses later, the writer gives these unfathomable riches rather fuller expression, in one of the letter’s great prayers, ‘I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.’ 3.18f To say Christ’s love surpasses knowledge is less to stress that it cannot be known at all, than to say that it’s so breathtakingly vast and complete that we cannot possibly sum it up. Less still can we - *should* we - confine it to the poor reach of people’s ever so human minds.

Again, when few of us would wish to have the old year back, this passage thrusts us into the new one, promising that whatever the future holds – even these early days of so many being ill or dying - the person of faith can enter it trusting in this super abundant love of God; God whose purpose is to give us hope and a future.

It became an axiom of 2020 that we’ll never go back to things the way they were. And so we won’t. Some have lost people so dear to them that they cannot conceive of discovering their old normality ever again. Grief can be like that, as it *‘moves irregularly, in zig-zag patterns’, ‘no steps forward without stumbles back, no relief without relapse.’*

And for others, there are things from which the coronavirus made them move on, things to which they do not *want* to return. An oft mentioned example is travelling and then parking for Elders’ Meetings at church on a dreich February night, when one could be at home taking part via Zoom. But might God’s bigger point be that the future is *more* than a return to the past? The people of Israel discovered this when they built a new temple that paradoxically was smaller and plainer than the previous one, and yet described as having a greater splendour, because of the peace, the shalom, that flowed from it.

And in a similar vein, how might 2021 be a renewing year, as vaccine-protected, we return from the exile of Covid-19? There will be significant economic challenges for the nation and countless of its households. We cannot pass by on the other side, as if those are happening to ‘the others’, to ‘them’, and aren’t our responsibility. Standing together as a society – no ‘them’ and ‘us’ - and striving for one another’s restoration will be our renewal.

For Downing Place United Reformed Church 2021 will also be a renewing year as we return to our ‘rebuilt’ Temple. In that we will have spent a large amount of money on it, it will be smart and well-equipped. But its splendour will only match that of both its forebears if it is a place of God’s shalom – a place of God’s welcome, acceptance and embrace, both physically and metaphorically at the very heart of our city. If what we are doing to those premises is to be anything more than a vanity project, its admirable renewal must equip us to be a resource for the salvation – the return to flourishing – of our bruised society until we all can arise and shine in enjoyment of God’s riches beyond words.

It is fatuous to think 2021 will be easy. It is faithful to put our hand into the hand of God, trusting that through the shadows it will be better than any known way.

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3<sup>rd</sup> January 2020