
Arise, shine, for your light has come,
and the glory of the Lord shines over you.
Isaiah 60:1

“Behold, my servant whom I have chosen,
my beloved with whom my soul is well pleased.

I will put my Spirit upon him, and he will proclaim justice to the Gentiles.
He will not quarrel or cry aloud, nor will anyone hear his voice in the streets;
a bruised reed he will not break, and a smouldering wick he will not quench.”

Matthew 12:18-20 (cf. Isaiah 42:1-4)

God’s grace and peace be with you as we step into a New Year together in His grace. Another Year is over, and another has begun – and can you imagine it is really 2019? The 20th Century is already a very long time ago!

As we continue our journey into the 21st century, and the beginning of the Third Millennium after the birth of our Lord, we certainly may ask a question about what the future may hold. As we ask this question, we may also ask what ‘the future’ may hold for ‘the church’. It is fascinating to ‘google’ the words ‘future’ and ‘church’, and to see all sorts of thoughts. There are seminars asking questions such as ‘Will the future have a church?’, and there are even jobs such as ‘Future Church Program Director’! What does ‘the future’ hold for ‘the church’?

We may ask this question also in mind with events such persecution of Christians on the increase in many places, as well as a ‘post-Christian world’ questioning the relevance of ‘traditional churches’. Furthermore, news such as the Roman Catholic Church naming more than 1,000 priests accused of child sex abuse, one may indeed wonder what ‘the future’ of ‘the church’ really is...

What do you see as ‘the future’ of ‘the church’? Why are you here today?

Here is a question for you to consider – either for reflection in your mind and heart, or possibly as a discussion with someone else later: “Why is it that, in many church groups today, there are not so many people who are ‘fragile’, and ‘on the fringes of society’? If the ‘Good News of Jesus Christ’ is meant for the ‘broken’ and ‘downhearted’, why is it that most church groups in the Western world seem to be dominated by people who have jobs (and are often well-qualified), have good houses, and so many other things?

There many ways of looking at this question, and we shall briefly look at several possible responses (with a focus on the last one).

Some people might say that God promises to bless those who live according to His Word and His ways as laid down in His Word. We should not deny this,

but thank God for His grace. Thus, one could say that one of the factors as to why there are not so many who are on the 'fringes' or who are 'fragile' is because God brings His blessing to those who come into His presence.

Second, some might say that as people who are on the 'fringes' of society come into contact with church groups, they generally find them to such 'church groups' to be 'positive' and 'supporting places'. In a congregation I was once involved with there were many housing trust homes (in fact, one suburb was almost exclusively 'housing trust'). But when people came into contact with church groups, following the example of others, they tended to become 'better dressed', more 'well spoken', and often found work and were able to 'do better'. They were encouraged, and became more 'positive' and 'self-supporting'.

However, let me suggest another, more 'radical', reason as to why there are not so many people who are 'fragile', and 'on the fringes of society': it is because they do not see 'the church' as a 'safe place'.

Now, here, we do not mean that 'the church' is not a 'safe place' according to the 'Safe at Church policies' of our Church (and, indeed, I would encourage all who have not yet undertaken this opportunity to attend this course to do so. We are called to make 'the church' a 'safe place').

But there is a deeper 'spiritual reason' as to why 'church' is 'not safe'. And to 'explain', let me read a small portion from my devotion book for 3rd January (Isaiah 63:6) where the Lord says, "I have trodden the winepress alone; from the nations no one was with me. I trampled them in my anger and trod them down in my wrath; their blood spattered my garments, and I stained all my clothing." This is God's metaphor for His judgement on His people and the nations. God is a 'holy God' executing justice', and many are 'afraid' of His presence.

And when you feel like you are 'on the fringes' or are 'fragile', it indeed does feel 'difficult' to 'attend worship'. (And, by the way, who is not to say that those who regularly attend worship do not also 'feel like they are on the fringes' or are 'fragile'...?)

But the Lord says that His 'church' is meant to be for the 'broken-hearted'. And Jesus was no stranger to this. He spent time with prostitutes and tax-collectors, as well as the politically influential, wealthy, and middle classes. And in our reading selected for today (Matthew 12:9-20) Jesus had just healed a man with a shrivelled hand on the Sabbath day. Many people, in Jesus' time, believed that if you incurred such an injury this was God 'punishing you' for 'doing something bad'. We may think this is a 'primitive view', but how often do we still 'shun people' who have disabilities and are 'n the fringes of society'? And Jesus had infuriated the Pharisees for apparently 'breaking' the 'Sabbath laws'.

In response Jesus spoke about how the Pharisees would look after their animals on the Sabbath, so why not care for 'someone on the fringes'? And the Pharisees saw Jesus' response as a 'threat' to their 'authority' – so much so that they went to conspire with people they had previously detested (the 'Herodians', cf. Matt.22:16, Mk.3:6: the 'Herodians' supported 'Herod, much to the displeasure of the Pharisees who did not see Herod as the 'rightful king') and they 'plotted how they may 'destroy' (not just 'kill', but to 'destroy') Jesus.

Jesus, divinely perceiving this, went to another place and 'healed all their sick'. This phrase is crucial. Remember how Jesus had gone to His 'home town' but was unable to heal many because of their 'lack of faith' (Mark 6:5)? Many were healed because they 'had faith. The healing had a purpose in leading people to an 'eternal faith'. And Matthew said that this was to fulfil the prophecy through Isaiah (Isa.42) that Jesus was 'the chosen servant' who will not 'the weakest reed or put out a flickering candle'.

One could spend a long time analysing Matthew's words here (and the fact that his rendition of Isaiah 42 does not match the Hebrew or Septuagint version of this passage: but this tells us that Matthew was 'going from memory', and did a rather fine job of remembering this!). Jesus was concerned for 'the weak' and 'vulnerable'. Techniques of the rabble-rouser, the sensationalist, and the soapbox orator were not His way. He simply went to the people in their need.

Jesus met the spiritually weak and helpless, being led by the Holy Spirit. Jesus is the compassionate One. Instead of allowing God's judgement to be borne by those who are spiritually weak and helpless, He took the divine judgment upon Himself and went the way of the cross *for us all!* And this is contrary to the common human approach to 'religion'.

With us too often religion is for the religious. The good have more goodness offered to them, but the bad are left in their badness. This was the case with the old-world religions, which fed the devotion of the devout, but neglected the ruin of those who seemed to be impious. But Christ and all who follow Christ bring the gospel to the lost. And this, then, also counteracts the stern processes of nature. In nature we witness the survival of the fittest. There the strong succeed and the weak fail, and the race is to the swift and the battle to the strong. Christ brings a more merciful principle to work. The bruised and crushed and hopeless are the especial objects of his care.

Jesus came to bring 'light' to a 'dark world'. And the prophet Isaiah said, "His name will be the hope of all the world."

No matter how you may have been hurt, Jesus can bring healing into your life today! When you let Jesus touch you at your deepest point of pain, His touch will not leave you the same. In His touch is healing and life! And this is not some 'spiritually abstract truth': this is real, for it is seen in the cross of Jesus that knows our sin, shame, sufferings, and death.

Where else in the world do we actually see the message of a person suffering so greatly for us than in Jesus, the God-made-flesh'?

This passage through Isaiah, that Matthew says in 'fulfilled' (finds its true meaning) in Jesus reminds us (1) that struggling person should not give up; (2) we need to be patient with people who are struggling in their walk with the Lord, and (3) that God's love is for all, even those who feel 'fragile' and 'on the fringes'.

If you 'feel strong' in life, praise God, but also let God be your strength. If you feel 'fragile' or are carrying some 'secret hurt', praise God, and also let God be your strength! Jesus is always here to lift us up, forgive us, cleanse us, and reach out to us with His great love and compassion. He is our light, our hope, our peace, and our joy, now and always.

Arise, shine, for your light has come, and the glory of the Lord shines over you. Amen!