**SERMON FOR 2 BEFORE LENT | 07.02.2021**

**Isaiah 60: 1-5, 18-20; 2 Corinthians 4: 1-6; St Matthew 5: 13-16**

**I am writing this on Friday morning. Thursday, if you remember, was grey and wet - but today the skies are blue, there is even a bit of warmth in the sunshine and people are stopping to talk (at least at a distance!) as I walk to Church and back.**

**There is no doubt that we are deeply affected by the weather, by the lack of sunshine … and by too much rain! And that’s not just Maria Flavius’ longing for those wonderfully sunny Caribbean days! My aunt used to complain of feeling SAD and the experts say that without enough exposure to the sun our serotonin levels drop and that can lead to a form of depression, sometimes called Seasonal Affective Disorder. Chasing the sun on holiday as many like to do has real health benefits. And we pray that will happen this year even if we don’t know when!**

**So the thread throughout the Bible which focuses on light and warmth is not a million miles away from our daily preoccupation with the weather, but of course it takes us into new places too.**

**Today’s 1st reading comes from one of the longest books in the Old Testament, from the Prophecy of Isaiah - which is really three books all rolled into one as the political events that lie behind the story happened over at least three life times not one.**

**By the time today’s passage was written, Isaiah of Jerusalem was long since dead and the people of Israel had returned from exile in Babylon. It was time for a new generation of disciples to pick up the original Isaiah’s ideas - less focused on the past, of exile and dislocation but now concentrating on themes like ‘what is God like?’ and ‘what is he choosing to do now?**

**By Chapter 60 and with the people all safely back home, the writer goes to town with a great celebration of the sights to be seen in their capital city of Jerusalem.**

**It was if the streets were paved with gold, so happy were they to be back where they belonged. Everything was returning to normal: the Temple and its priests were there; trade was flourishing and foreign kings were everywhere because Jerusalem had become the smart place to be. Expensively rebuilt and refurbished after the Babylonian exile, the city was simply dazzling and the fact that in that part of the world there is almost no dawn and no dusk - the blackness of night literally erupts into the brightness of day in no time at all - only added to the sense of this being a very special place.**

**Even those connected with Abraham who lived in the southernmost part of the Arabian peninsular would come, trying to reconnect with their great ancestor. *Nations shall come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.***

**But it is the next bit that is interesting. *The sun shall no longer be your light by day nor the moon give light to you by night…*  What is that all about?**

**And the answer is that instead of having to rely on the sun and the moon for the light they needed; instead of worrying about grey skies or rain, Isaiah says it is the presence of God that really mattered. That is infinitely more beneficial to our spirits than anything that shines in the sky. *Your sun shall no more go down, or the moon withdraw itself; for the Lord will be your everlasting light, and your days of mourning shall be ended.***

**In other words, whatever the weather - the sun or the lack of it - our relationship with God will do more than boost our morale and keep us from being sad; when the light of God shines, we have a new power to handle all the darkness that life throw at us. In Jesus’ words in the Gospel, we can go even further: God’s brilliance won’t just transform Jerusalem from a minor backwater into a buzzing international centre where people wanted to be, the same light from God will turn each of us into ’lights for the world’ too - people of influence for good just as Jerusalem was to be an eternal symbol of a place of influence for good.**

**Just as we need the sun in the sky to give us the serotonin we need to be happy so the light that God gives by his Spirit will enable us to go out there and transform the world. That is the thread of the argument.**

**But does it work? Even if we believe in the transforming power of God with our heads, it doesn’t always feel that easy! The grey clouds (in whatever form they take) can seem overwhelming, especially in these days of lockdown when we can’t get out or spend time with the friends and family who are able to lift our spirits.**

**The emphasis on mental health - publicised by the royal princes a few years back and being backed up in a major talk by Bishop Sarah on March 23rd - is now re-emerging as a significant social problem. Depression is an unwelcome guest at any time but it has become all too familiar to many of us this year. In every sense we talk of people being in a ‘dark place’.**

**Depression comes, of course, in all shapes and sizes. As well as a general listlessness, a lack of energy, a growing uncertainty about how to cope, we also get increasingly sensitive to what people do or say around us. Like the great prophet Elijah we can begin to feel very sorry for ourselves and we wonder what the future holds.**

**And it is into that kind of scenario that St Paul offers some advice in the second reading. He is working with the uppity Church in Corinth, full of people who think they know best. But he suspects that this is mostly bravado and so he has a go at the stupid ways they try to make themselves feel good: the cunning, the jockeying for attention, the refusal to be straightforward and honest and the twisting of the words of the Bible to fit what they wanted to believe.**

**Paul doesn't pull any punches as he points out how badly this wealthy Corinthian Church had been behaving when they had every opportunity to show the much kinder and fairer example of Jesus: *in their case the god of this world has blinded their minds to keep them from seeing the light of the gospel of Jesus Christ.***

**He then begins to show them the way out of the hole they have dug for themselves. If, as he believes, they don’t want to feel endlessly depressed or disappointed that things aren’t working out, the only solution was to actively ask for God’s grace. Without that grace, he says, whatever they said, whatever they did, was useless - no better than *a resounding gong or a clanging cymbal* as he says in that famous passage in his first letter to the Corinthians, chapter 13.**

**And that means getting out of the way: *we do not proclaim ourselves; we proclaim Jesus Christ as Lord and ourselves as your slaves for Jesus’ sake. For it is God who said, ‘Let light shine out of darkness’, he who has shone in our hearts to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ…***

**So what do we do when the fog of depression begins to cloud our ability to cope?**

**St Paul’s advice seems to start with being honest: the admission that the gremlins have got to us for a while too! Even in lockdown I hope each of us has got someone with whom we can be that honest, someone who doesn’t expect (or even want) us to put on the kind of mask designed to keep all our secrets all locked up.**

**The second bit of advice flows from that: that we don’t fall for the temptation to find someone else to blame for how we feel. It’s not fair and it rarely helps.**

**Third, we need to give God some time - a chunk of time if we can. *What,* we might ask him, *is really going on here? Am I beating myself up unnecessarily? What are the real causes for this particular problem? What is going on in the lives of other people to make them behave as they do?***

**Those questions - and lots more like them - then become the conduits for God’s grace. As we wait for his answers so the jigsaw pieces begin to fall into place and we learn to take responsibility for the things which really are down to us … and learn to leave to one side things that we can neither change nor control.**

**This is the kind of ‘revealing light’ that holds us up, heals us and encourages us. It is this process of absorbing Christ’s light that has the effect of turning us upside down and inside out: we change from being just reluctant watchers of the sunrise to being people who shine like the sunrise ourselves. As Jesus said in his Sermon to the crowds in Galilee, *let your light so shine in the world, that they may see your good works - and give thanks to your heavenly Father who is in heaven.***

**And when that happens, we so often find the fog beginning to lift. God’s light: God’s spiritual, healing serotonin!**