



LENT COURSE 2021

ISAIAH 60 - 62

“BEAUTY FOR ASHES”

A JOURNEY FROM DARKNESS TO LIGHT





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“The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me; He has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed, to bind up the broken hearted.” (Isaiah 61:1)

This season of Lent coincides with a period of great testing and darkness, as the world remains in the shadow of Covid-19. There are many millions of people feeling oppressed and broken hearted, as we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. The section of the book of the prophet Isaiah which we are using to reflect upon and stimulate our creativity this Lent, Chapters 60 to 62, acknowledges darkness, but also gives us the promise of the dawning of light. Jesus used words from Isaiah 61 to inaugurate his own public ministry, and claimed that in his person and ministry he was in the process of fulfilling them.

As we reflect on these chapters together, we pray that Jesus will speak afresh to us through these words, and bring light and hope to our darkness.

Scholars see Isaiah 60 - 62 as a single poetic unit, the work of a prophetic voice speaking in Jerusalem after the Jews had returned from their exile in Babylon, when rebuilding was taking place between 538 and 444BC. In 587BC Jerusalem had been completely destroyed, and its leaders executed or exiled. Many of the population died in battle, from starvation or from disease. Only a handful remained, joined in 538BC by the exiles who had returned home. They were dispirited and demoralised, waiting for the fulfilment of God’s promises that the city would be rebuilt.

These chapters are full of power and beauty, in which the prophet sets out the character and purposes of God. In Walter Brueggemann’s words, this passage sets out the “offer of a counter-world, counter to denial and despair, counter-routed in God’s steadfast purposes for a new Jerusalem and a new covenant.” Isaiah 60 - 62 is one of the great works of prophetic imagination in the Bible, a window into the experience of the Israelite people at a time of great distress, uncertainty and fear, an echo of the condition in which we find ourselves in the first half of 2021. At a time when much of our world is in the deepest night, this series of five reflections begins in darkness, sees the coming of dawn with God’s message of hope, and ends in the glorious light of Easter, when God’s glory shines out over the city, and desolation gives way to the realisation that God is with us.

Before beginning the sessions we suggest that you read through all three chapters in one go, and then go to the first session. Each session includes some material for reflection, and ends with a prayer and a piece of music, which is linked to the theme and is available to listen to through a link on the Parish website. Feel free to use this as a self-contained exercise, or to go on to the creative activities in the yellow box.