

Brackenhurst 4 January 2009 09h30 & 18h30 Holy Communion
The Year of the Lord's Favour

Welcome & Notices

Scripture:

Isaiah 61:10-62:3

Luke 4:14-30

Message

INTRODUCTION

- Can you believe that another year has gone by already?
 - It seems at the same time a year that has gone by so quickly
 - * yet at the same time things that happened at the start of the year seem ages ago
- So I don't know all the things that this past year has brought for you
 - I know there are many people who have lost loved ones during this year
 - * But there are also many who have celebrated the birth of new family members
 - There are many who have suffered during times of illness
 - * And others who have celebrated marriages
 - There are many who have struggled financially
 - * And others who have finally seen light at the end of the tunnel
- It has been a year that has been mixed on many different levels
 - In our lives, our homes, our country, the church
 - * Thinking of the some the the things that we've done over this last year — the refugees
 - A sad situation, but one that was also an opportunity to share God's love and grace
- And I have no doubt that this year is going to be very similar
 - Filled with ups and downs, good and bad
- And yet, if we are faithful I believe that we will discover the presence of Christ in each of those situations that we face
 - Especially if we carry on as I suggested last week
- Searching for Christ everyday with an air of anticipation
 - Expecting Christ to be in every situation and every person that we come across

- If we continue faithfully in being devoted to our duties even when we don't feel like it
 - * Discovering Christ in the unpleasant tasks and places that we are called to
- And living with the sense of the Spirit within us and around us as we go about our daily tasks
- And I think all of us would want to say this time next year that we have grown in our understanding of Jesus
 - Of who he is
 - * And of how he is present in our lives
 - * Of how he loves us and cares for us
- This morning's reading has Isaiah prophesying about the Year of the Lord's favour
 - And maybe this is a good thought to start the year with
 - * A year that at the moment holds, probably more fear than hope
- It seems as though this next year is going to be a challenging one, especially from a financial point of view
 - As we look at the world economy
 - * And as we face the very real threat of job layoffs in our own
- Let's choose today to say whatever happens in 2009 that we celebrate it as the year of the Lord's favour
 - And please hear "The year of the *Lord's* favour"
 - * Not the year in which everything works out the way I want it to
 - * Not the year in which I get mine
- But the year of the Lord's favour
 - The year in which we commit to God's plan and purposes, trusting in him, rather than ourselves
- If we do this I think we are going to take what could be a very challenging year and make the best of it,
 - relying not on our own strength and wisdom, but on that of God.
- During challenging times, when things get difficult we are often inclined to be afraid of what may happen
 - but difficult times also brings amazing opportunities for those who are willing to see things differently
 - * and who are open to taking risks
- As I look at our readings today I think that these words call us to three areas of opportunity that we would do well to look at in this new year:
 - Giving Grace

- Going Home
- Having Hope

(1) GIVING GRACE (The Year of Jubilee)

- Isaiah begins his prophetic words to the Israelites — and we're going to look more deeply at the context in a moment
 - But he begins his words with a phrase that was laden with meaning for the Jews

He says, "The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is upon me [to do all these setting free things] and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

* The Year of the Lord's Favour
- The Year of the Lord's favour reminds us of a practice that the Israelites had, which had the function of regulating the economic system under which they lived.
 - Now that already sounds like a good idea after what the world's economic system went through last year
- If you go back to the legislative texts in the Old Testament you will discover in Exodus (23:10-11), Leviticus (25:1-28) and Deuteronomy (15:1-6) that the Year of Jubilee in Israel's history when the playing fields were levelled and debts were forgiven.
 - Every seventh year was observed as a Sabbath year, and the fiftieth as the year of jubilee
- Let's read what happened in Leviticus 25:1-17
 - Now there is no evidence to suggest that this was ever practised once they were in the promised land, but it is a real alternative, I think to rampant capitalism or communism
- It is a financial system based on grace, a restoring grace which gives everybody an opportunity to work for himself, to earn as much as he can, the motivation to make money
 - But at the same time it ensures that over a period of generations no family gets completely beaten into poverty
- If you're lazy and don't work don't expect to still get what they guy who works hard gets
 - You can expect to lose your land
 - You can expect to have to sell yourself and your family into slavery
- But when the year of jubilee comes you, or you family, will have their freedom restored to them
 - You will have your land restored

- You will have the chance to start over again
- In this way no one of God's chosen people could permanently end up very rich, and no family could end up permanently very poor
 - The gap between the rich and poor was kept manageable
- So as Isaiah begins his message to those in Exile this is the image that he brings to mind
 - A time when restoration is about to happen
 - A time when God's grace is about to be experienced again
 - A time when things are about to change for the better
- But there is another time in scripture when this verse is quoted
- And that is when Jesus begins his public ministry at Nazareth as recorded by Luke
 - Jesus quotes this verse and tells the people gathered to hear him in the synagogue that that scripture is fulfilled in their hearing
 - * He proclaims that the time of the Lord's favour has come
 - * The time of God's restoration has arrived
 - * The time is right for God's grace to be experienced
- In Mark's gospel Jesus says it another way: "The Kingdom of God is at hand."
 - All those with debts are to be set free of their obligation
 - Those in slavery are to be released
 - It is time to restore some equilibrium to society
- This morning as we look at the new year filled with fear, but also opportunity, we need to go back again to believing that this will be the year of the Lord's favour
 - The year of Jubilee
 - Of restoring imbalances in our lives and in the lives of our communities
- How does this challenge us in the New Year to be grace givers?
 - How do we administer restorative grace: grace that doesn't exempt people from their responsibilities, but at the same times gives people the opportunity and motivation to start over
 - * And gives us as a society the freedom to deal with some of the inequalities around us?
- I don't know the answers, but you do
 - We're all creative, let's use our creativity in the places where each of us are particularly challenged
 - * eg sharing school lunch, invite to be part of group, help with studies
 - * Or an opportunity for education of someone who works for you
 - * That's where mission starts and sometimes that's duty

- But working together to eliminate inequalities to build a society that God can look upon with favour
- So the first opportunity offered to us as Christ followers in the new Year — if we are to be the people God wants, and if we are to experience the Year of the Lord's favour
 - Is to look for places to proclaim God's restorative grace
 - To be givers of God's grace
 - * To those closest to us
 - * To our enemies
 - * And to those who don't deserve it
 - But especially to those who are struggling with what this year is going to bring
- It's interesting that when Jesus proclaimed this message the people got very upset and wanted throw him off the cliff
 - But the people living in Nazareth missed out on the year of the Lord's favour because it was too difficult to hear and so Jesus walked through the crowd and went on his way.

(2) GOING HOME (The Promise of Jubilee)

- Now let's get into the historical context of the words spoken by the prophet Isaiah and he makes this announcement of the Year of the Lord's Favour
 - These words are words spoken, it seems, to two groups of people:
 - * There are those who are in exile in Babylon as they prepare to leave their place of captivity and return to their ancestral home
 - * And there are those who have stayed behind in the ruined city of Jerusalem
- If you know the history, and I hope that you do, because understanding the event of the Exile is central to understanding the history and theology of much of the Old Testament
 - If you know your history you will remember that Israel had become consolidated as a nation under the kings Saul and David, but after the death of David's successor Solomon the Kingdom divided into two nations
 - * Later on the northern kingdom was destroyed by invading forces from Assyria
 - * And after that the Southern kingdom was destroyed by the Babylonians
- And a whole group of citizens from Jerusalem was taken into Exile in Babylon
 - They stayed there for about 70 years until the Babylonians were overthrown by the Persians who in turn let them go back to rebuild their own country

- This was a time of tremendous soul searching for the people in captivity because as far as they could see God had abandoned them
 - They'd lost their land, their homes
 - They'd lost the temple where God lived
 - And they were in a far off country
 - * And so clearly to their understanding they must have done something that offended God that caused God to abandon them
- So a whole lot of their theology is trying to understand what they had done wrong for this to happen
 - Anyway, they spend 70 years in Exile going through this period, in their understanding, of purification
- And Isaiah comes along proclaiming words of comfort, proclaiming that they have served their punishment, that they have done their time
 - And now he announces, using the metaphor of the year of Jubilee, that the time of freedom has come
 - * The land, that land which God had given to them, their heritage was to be restored
 - * Their slavery was over
 - * their freedom was to be given back to them.
- It is a call and an announcement that people who have been a long way from God are being moved back to the place where God wanted them to be
 - They are moving back to the place of first values and principles
 - the Exile had purified the people of Jerusalem, and now they were free to return
 - * They were going home!
- But it was also a period of frightening change - a generation had made their home in Babylon and didn't know what to expect of a new country that was in ruins
 - They would have to rebuild
 - in many instances starting from scratch
 - It wasn't going to be easy
 - * And you can read about the struggle to rebuild the wall, to rebuild the temple, to rebuild their homes, their values in some of the books of the Bible
- So the second opportunity offered to us as Christ followers in the new Year — if we are to be the people God wants, and if we are to experience the Year of the Lord's favour
 - Is to go home
 - * To go back to the first principles of our faith

- And again, I don't know how you are to do that, but I know that you are creative and we will find ways
 - Maybe it means going back to issues of justice and asking why there is such a gap between rich and poor
 - * And asking what we can do to correct that
 - Maybe it means looking at issues of holiness
 - * What holiness means and whether we really are living holy lives
 - Maybe it means looking at what the foundation stones are for our lives:
 - * Are our lives built on the values of community, family and fellowship
 - * Or is it all about me and what i can accumulate and do for my family, rather than for the community
- Maybe that's an opportunity that a recession, that an economic crisis gives us
 - An opportunity to look away from money and material things
 - * (Things that enslave us — Mortgage slave!)
 - A time for us to reflect on our community values and what is really important

(3) HAVING HOPE (Jubilee for all)

- Thirdly, then, this morning as we look at opportunities to be found in living the year of the Lord's favour,
 - We discover the opportunity of having hope
- One of the things that I've noticed at the beginning of the new year is that people love to make projections on what the new year is going hold
 - And the newspapers will speak to economists wanting their version of what's going to happen in the economy
 - And magazines will write articles about what technology we can expect to see in the coming year
 - And fashionistas will talk about what fashions will be coming out the next season
- But my favourite, at this time of the year, are horoscopes!
 - What the stars foretell for 2009!
- And every magazine and every newspaper has full length article written by their resident astrologer predicting what kind of a future your particular star-sign will have in the coming year
 - You've seen them?
 - * You've read them? Come on, be honest!
- Why do we read them?
 - The bottom line truth of why we read our horoscopes, whether daily, weekly, or at the beginning of the new year is this:

- * We want to discover some kind of hope
- We're looking for a sign, anywhere, that will give us a little bit of encouragement that things will be better
 - That there is indeed something to hope for in 2009
 - * Whether in horoscope, or financial indicators, or technology
- This is where Isaiah's words become powerful again
 - He is writing words of hope
- He is writing to a people who are undergoing a tremendous amount of change, a major transformation and upheaval, saying to them
 - Yes, things are changing, yes, things are going to be difficult
 - * BUT, BUT
 - look out for the good stuff that's going to happen
- I think, as a church, we don't speak about hope enough
 - Our message, our core message, should be hope
 - * And every different facet and aspect of hope that we can think about, and yet so often we focus on other things
- And we leave people to try to find hope in horoscopes and their finances and material things.
 - I pray that a collapsing economic system, a recession will teach us how to have a hope that transcends those things
- A hope that is not built on how much we can earn or how much we can save, or where we can go
 - But hope that comes from knowing that there is more to life than worrying about the financial markets
 - Hope for ourselves and hope for others
 - * And a hope that is built on and is based on our faith as Christ followers.
- Paul writes to the Colossians, one of my favourite verses, and he says this:
 - “The secret is simply this: Christ in you, yes Christ in you! bringing with him the hope of all glorious things to come! (Col 1:27)
- Yes, there may be changes and challenges, which are scary
 - But Christ himself has gone through the darkness to the other side, and he will go through the darkness with us, until we come out the other side, in glory!
- The third opportunity offered to us as Christ followers in the New Year — if we are to be the people God wants, and if we are to experience the Year of the Lord's favour
 - Is the opportunity to discover again the hope that have in Christ Jesus
 - * Not in anything else
- But in Christ Jesus

- And in that to discover again that he will indeed bring us safely through to the other side.

CONCLUSION

- Let me close off
 - We have spoken about the year of the Lord's favour, about Jubilee, and the opportunities that this theology
 - * And the possibly difficult challenges of tough year that lies ahead call us to
- Opportunities of giving — and sharing — grace
 - Opportunities of going back and rediscovering what is really important
 - * And who we really are called to be
 - And opportunities of having hope, once again.
 - * And I think that if we are to experience the Year of the Lord's favour it has to be done in hope.
- I finally finished reading a deeply challenging book the other day
 - I've been trying to get through it for about a year now, but it's been so exciting that I keep stopping to tell someone about what I've been reading
- Brian McLaren — Everything must change
 - Started out by saying "Hope Happens"
 - * And that's where he ends
- And he begins his conclusion by quoting another author who asks the question, "Where do we find hope?"
 - Right where it's always been - between faith and love
- These are the qualities written about and prophesied by Isaiah
 - And claimed by Christ as he announces his mission
- As we live by faith and open our hearts to love those around us - regardless of our circumstances
 - We return home to be the people God has created and called us to be
- As we trust in God and his word
 - regardless of our circumstances we will experience the year of the Lord's Favour.
- May it be so for you, even as it is for me.
- Amen

Prayers of Response and Intercession

- Closing Song (pm — Did you feel the Mountains Tremble?)

Benediction; Doxology