



# *Christ Church Cathedral*

## OXFORD

**12 July 2020: Sunday Worship**

**The Fifth Sunday after Trinity**

**Isaiah 55:10–13; Matthew 13:1–9, 18–23**

**The Venerable Jonathan Chaffey, The Archdeacon of Oxford**

*“So is my word that goes out from my mouth: it will not return to me empty” – Isaiah 55.11*

Our OT reading today is a passage of promise within a chapter of invitation. This might seem somewhat incongruous, when you consider that it was addressed to a people in exile. The reason for its upbeat message is that the Babylonians, who had taken the Israelites into captivity, were themselves being overrun by the might of Cyrus and the rise of the Medo-Persian empire – and so it was in 538 BC, through the providence of God, that Cyrus allowed the Jewish nation to return home. You can read all about the return in the books of Ezra and Nehemiah. Of particular significance for us is the understanding that the recovery was more than a physical matter, great though that was; it was also a time of spiritual renewal for the nation, as the people allowed the word of God to take root once more in their corporate life.

The exile was a severe experience for the ancient Israelites, its desolation graphically portrayed in Ps 137: “By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion...how can we sing the songs of the Lord in a strange land?” The forced separation from their physical and spiritual homeland was brutal and unwanted. Yet it also became an opportunity for them to listen afresh to the voice of God, to rediscover their first love, to dream that they might again fulfil their God-given identity as a nation. So in Isaiah 55 we see an extraordinary series of invitation from God. “Come ... Listen ... Seek... Turn...”. The passage is full of grace, calling people back to God, to eat and drink freely, to delight in the richest of fare. For an everlasting covenant, a lasting kingship were still on offer, indelible promises inscribed by God’s faithful love.

Comparisons across time and space can be misleading, betraying a lack of empathy with scale and detail, with limited account given to the material, cultural, emotional or spiritual factors of each setting. Holding that caveat in mind, I suggest that exiles do come in various forms. The most dramatic may be expulsion or retreat from a physical home for communities or individuals. One

can hardly imagine today the hardships incurred by migrants desperately making their way across the Mediterranean from North Africa or the Middle-East; or indeed the suffering of those remaining as prisoners within their own land, as the Yazidis or Rohingya peoples in recent years. My pastoral experience suggests that other settings may also carry elements of a wilderness experience: the compulsion of addictive behaviour, the isolation of depression, victimisation as a result of racism, the pain of relationship abuse or breakdown, the powerlessness that may accompany unemployment. Some of this may relate to your own experience, perhaps even now in the many hardships created through the current pandemic – times when we feel excluded from our true selves and alienated from our hoped for place in society. They often come with a longing for restoration not just of body but also of soul, revealing a deep desire for understanding from others, for affirmation of personal value, for the precious gift of intimate love. And yet one can hardly find the strength to help oneself. A member of Alcoholics Anonymous once told me how much he had been helped by the piece of prose, ‘Please hear what I’m not saying’: ‘I frantically create a mask to hide behind, a nonchalant sophisticated façade, to help me pretend, to shield me from the glance that knows. But such a glance is precisely my salvation, my only hope, and I know it. That is, if it’s followed by acceptance, if it’s followed by love.’

Into this space comes the ultimate offer of affirmation and love, from God himself. This is unchanging, permanent; as the last verse of the chapter declares, it can never be destroyed. ‘As the rain and snow come down from heaven...so is my word that goes out from my mouth.’ Utilising an illustration easily understood by the audience, just as there is an inevitability of nourishment following precipitation, so with God’s word: ‘It will not return to me empty but will accomplish the purpose for which I sent it.’

I encourage you to dwell on this beautiful chapter of the Bible. Consider its teaching, what it tells us concerning the astonishing covenant love of God, even in the darkest of times. Then move from an impersonal reading to consider what God is saying to you about his love, remembering also how that love was supremely offered in the sacrificial life of Jesus. How will you respond to his call to come, to listen, to delight? Are you prepared to turn, from mindsets and behaviours that do not belong in such a divinely inspired relationship?

Having been renewed ourselves, let us then face outwards. God’s love and restoration may come directly, not least through the scriptures speaking to our souls, but it is often channelled through the form of human love, a family member, a friend, a volunteer. God the Father calls us to share his word, most especially the word made flesh in Jesus: to transform thorn bushes into pine trees, wastelands to homelands, offering his joy and peace. This is true for the ministry of Christ Church

as both College Chapel and Diocesan Cathedral. We are called not just to be the recipients of the seed, the word of God, but the sower, sharing the good news of Jesus Christ within our families and wider communities. This is a high calling, at a time in our national life when we need to recover a deeper spiritual identity. And as we go on our way, be encouraged; for there is an inevitability of God's word being fulfilled. For as I once heard the great teacher, John Stott, remark: "Behind the word of the Lord is the Lord of the word". Or as Isaiah describes it: 'This will be for the Lord's renown, an everlasting sign which will not be destroyed.'

Almighty God,

Your word stands firm through all generations  
and you fulfil your purposes as year succeeds to year.  
Help us to share your truth and live out your love  
that all who receive it may delight in the richest of fare,  
through the love of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.