



ELY CATHEDRAL

Weekly Reflection by Canon Jessica Martin



11 January 2021

Today's reflection was given as the Evensong sermon on the Feast of the Baptism of Christ, 10 January.

'He will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street; a bruised reed he will not break, and a dimly burning wick he will not quench; he will faithfully bring forth justice.' The Prophecy of Isaiah, chapter 42, verses 2-3.

What do you think of when you hear the word 'righteous'?

Outside church, it's probably used most often joined to the word 'self'. And it's really not a compliment to say someone is 'self-righteous'. We don't approve of people who make themselves feel better about their secret faults by undermining other people's public ones. That's because we know that nobody makes themselves right just by asserting that they are.

We are strangely shy to identify the genuinely 'righteous' among us. Yet to be 'righteous' means that a person is committed to justice; attentive to the right ways and being of God; turned towards the good. They are looking away from themselves and towards the common wellbeing of all. They 'are what God has made them...created for good works', as St Paul says.

It's true that it's a high bar. But many, many people act righteously. There is righteousness all around us, un-named, and sometimes unpraised, as people turn towards the good which it falls to them to do, often invisibly, unglamorously, privately.

The prophecy of Isaiah imagines what a truly righteous person will be like. He will be one whose authority comes from the constant, obedient attention he pays to God's presiding presence. In the prophecy, this quintessentially righteous person is called 'my chosen, in whom my soul delights'.

Those words of praise will be echoed as Jesus comes up from the water at his baptism: the voice of God calls him 'My Son, the Beloved, with whom I am well pleased'. Jesus's baptism is itself an act of attentive obedience: he does not need cleansing from his sins, but he submits to the symbolic death and rebirth of baptism simply because he is turned towards God's will.

This most righteous man commands the respect of others not because he is a master, but because he is a servant.

Isaiah's prophecy says that such a man 'will not cry or lift up his voice, or make it heard in the street'. This isn't because the righteous person is shy or fearful or lacking confidence. On the contrary. Across the Old Testament those who 'cry out' are the fearful ones, the ones who have lost control of a situation.

The one who does not 'cry out' is steadfast. He is faithful. He knows he will be heard, because the authority he carries is not his own. He has a responsibility for others; to protect the weak, those whose light is flickering, those whose strength is failing. He shoulders the burden of others' wellbeing and never murmurs at its heaviness. That is our Lord, Jesus the Messiah, who carried others' burdens all the way to death in astonishing and steadfast patience.

None of us is Jesus, of course. But those who have, like Jesus, been baptised, have turned towards the goodness of God and asked to be its servant. We have received being 'righteous' as both a gift and a duty.

It does not involve being loud, or self-aggrandizing. It is not the way of dominance, violence or riot. It is the lifetime's work of discovering what good path God opens out for each of his children, what 'way of life' we are called to follow. It asks for patience; for forbearance; for self-discipline and a constant attention to the needs of the common good.

At these most dark and dangerous times it may involve a sort of invisibility which is hard to bear, for the sake of the weak whose light might too easily be put out. It is not easy, or eye-catching, or necessarily the subject of much public praise or attention. Like love, of which it is a sign, righteousness works almost secretly, underpinning every great public good with a series of unremarked acts of care.

Almost unremarked, anyway. For no good act goes truly unseen. As you come up out of the water; as your violent self-regard dies and the dove of peace alights upon you, the author of all that is good will speak and say: 'here is my Beloved, the one in whom my soul delights'. And the person to whom that voice speaks will be you.