

Isaiah 61:1. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me;

Children like to draw nativity pictures. Shepherds and wise men and Mr and Mrs Christ and their baby son Jesus Christ. You and I are better educated, if not any wiser. We know that Christ is a title. It is the Greek word for “anointed”. And the Hebrew word for anointed is “Messiah”. Jesus Christ – Jesus the anointed one. Jesus the Messiah – Jesus the anointed one.

But until we can find out what the Bible means by anointed we are no better off. What did Jesus mean when he used about himself the verse from Isaiah we read this morning “The spirit of the Lord God is upon me because the Lord has anointed me”? All the Bible scholars in the world agree what anointed means – except one. All the theologians agree why Jesus is called “Christ”, why Jesus is called “anointed” – except me!

The scholars discovered a long time ago that in the old days they took the holy oil and they put it on the heads of three kinds of people. They anointed prophets, they anointed priests and they anointed kings. When Jesus is called the anointed one the Christ, what is meant is that he is prophet, priest and king. The theologians agree that that is who Jesus is, that is what Jesus does.

Thinking of Jesus as prophet, priest and king produces a certain kind of believing. Because they anointed prophets, the prophetic role of the church and its ministers is emphasised. “He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim release to those in prison, to proclaim a Jubilee year of the Lord’s favour”. So the whole Christian tradition of engagement with the political issues of the world is born in that vision of Jesus as prophet. He is not anointed merely to give us good feelings inside, but to call to account the wicked structures of the world that keep the poor from justice and keep the rich from humanity and keep us all in imprisonment to the

materialism of the day. Fair trading and decent welfare provision for people with disability and safety for refugees. That living out of Christianity in the world is so important, and its theological basis is Jesus born to be the prophet, born to be the anointed one, the Christ. In a great advent hymn we sing
*His power increasing still shall spread
His reign no end shall know
Justice shall guard his throne above
And peace abound below*

They anointed priests. Jesus as priest is also vital for Christianity and vital for understanding Christmas. That word can make Protestants unnecessarily afraid: this is not a Roman Catholic way of thinking. Jesus is anointed to be the one who brings the people close to God and brings God close to the people. His activity as priest is to bring us close to God and bring God close to us. That understanding of the work of the anointed one, the Christ, is in so many of our Christmas hymns. The one who brings us close to God and the one who brings God close to us.

*Lo, within a manger lies he who built the starry skies
Ho who, throned in height sublime Sits amid the cherubim*

The three kinds of people upon whom they poured the holy oil were prophets, priest and kings. So Jesus the Christ is the man born to be king. Even living as we do with confusing attitudes to monarchy we can at least grasp that the king had power and the king had authority. Jesus is born to rule: to rule our lives and to rule the world. What he expects – this Christmas baby – is that we should obey: what he promises, this Christmas baby – is that in this unruly and disappointing world his will will be done.

*On Christmas night all Christians sing
To hear the news the angels bring
News of great joy, news of great mirth
News of our merciful king's birth*

That's what anointed means: Jesus is our prophet, our priest and our king. Everyone agrees.

All except me. I want to suggest another way in to the mystery of Christmas: a way in which uses exactly the same method as the others, but follows a different route. The mistake in the theology which we have just been following, which everyone teaches is that it starts by finding out who the Bible tells were sprinkled with holy oil. I think that is starting in the wrong place. The whole point of Christmas, the emphasis of Christmas, is the ordinariness, the unholiness, the commonplace, the dirt of the stable and the homage of common shepherds. What if we were to look in the Bible for anointing with ordinary oil, not holy oil? What if ordinariness were the key to understanding the Biblical meaning of Christ, of Messiah?

If you take that route, here is what you find. In the first place, people were anointed with ordinary oil – not holy oil – for celebration and delight. When Ruth goes forth to meet her husband, she anoints herself with oil; when mourners expressed their grief, they gave up anointing themselves. So Jesus is come for joy and life and life in all its fullness. He is our delight and our celebration: the source of joy and the end of joy.

O come, all ye faithful, joyful and triumphant

O come ye, o come ye to Bethlehem

Come and behold him, born the king of angels

O come, let us adore him.

In the second place, anointing with ordinary oil was for healing – remember the good Samaritan bathing the wounds of the roadside victim, bathing them in oil. So Jesus is for us the anointed one, the Messiah, the Christ: he is himself our healing. As Christmas approaches the hurt eyes of the world turn to Bethlehem and the sorest of hearts look for healing. As Christmas approaches hospitals and sick beds become the very House of God: Jesus the Christ is born to heal. As Christmas approaches the most hard-bitten sinner is touched by the need for reconciliation and by the strength to make a new start.

Child in the manger, infant of Mary

Outcast and stranger, lord of all

*Child who inherits all our transgressions
All our demerits, on him fall.*

Could there be anything in this other way of thinking about “anointed”? Now here is my best argument. Ordinary oil for joy and ordinary oil for healing. Good enough. But there is one verse I have discovered in the Old Testament – Exodus 29:36 – where ordinary oil is to be used for anointing the place of sacrifice. I wonder if that word brings us closer than all the other meanings of anointed that we have seen: I wonder if sacrifice is at the centre of the whole meaning of Christmas. “God loved the world so much that he gave his only Son”. When they brought gifts to the infant Jesus among them was the gift of frankincense, the sign of sacrifice. From the first this was not only the man born to be king: this is the man born to be given into the hands of sinful men, to suffer and to die. In every communion service we meet again Jesus offering himself as sacrifice and we hear again Jesus saying to us *This is my body, which is broken for you*. Only when we think of Calvary when we think of Christmas do we think of Christmas aright.

*Then let us all with one accord
Sing praises to our heavenly lord
That hath made heaven and earth of naught
And with his blood every one of us hath bought.*

So, for today at least, leave the other theologians behind and move with me. Move from Jesus our prophet, priest and king to Jesus our delight, our healing and our sacrifice. Move to a more gentle Christmas.

Amen