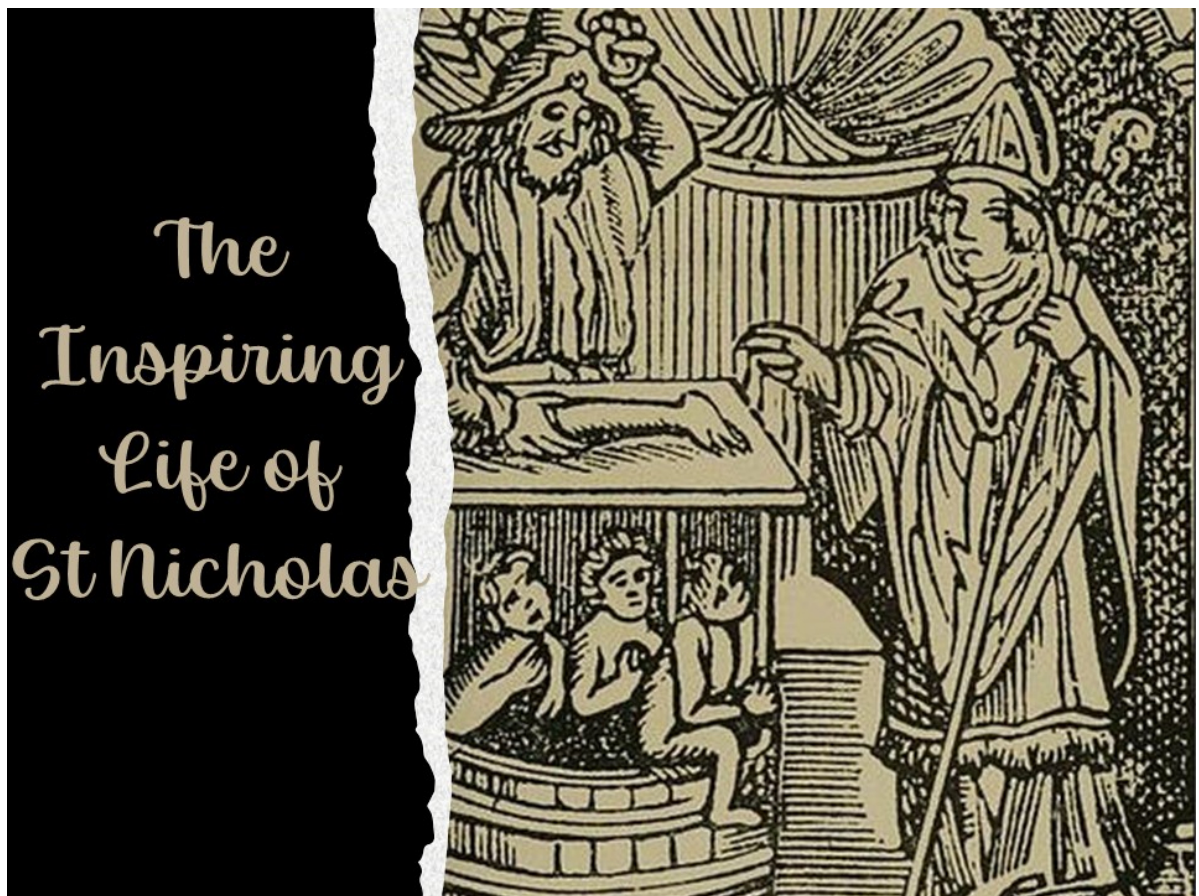


Sunday 10th December 2023, the second Sunday of Advent at 9.00 am
and 10.30 am

THE INSPIRING LIFE OF SAINT NICHOLAS

Sermon preached by The Revd Dr Tony Martin delivered at Cromwell
Presbyterian Church



READINGS:

Isaiah 61:1-4

**The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-
hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the
prisoners,
2 to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
3 and provide for those who grieve in
Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the Lord
for the display of his splendour.**

**4 They will rebuild the ancient ruins
and restore the places long devastated;
they will renew the ruined cities
that have been devastated for
generations.**

Romans 10:12-15

**12 For there is no difference between Jew and
Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and
richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for,
“Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord
will be saved.”**

**14 How, then, can they call on the one they
have not believed in? And how can they
believe in the one of whom they have not
heard? And how can they hear without
someone preaching to them? 15 And how
can anyone preach unless they are sent? As
it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of
those who bring good news!”**

Mark 10:13-16

The Little Children and Jesus

¹³ People were bringing little children to Jesus for him to place his hands on them, but the disciples rebuked them. ¹⁴ When Jesus saw this, he was indignant. He said to them, “Let the little children come to me, and do not hinder them, for the kingdom of God belongs to such as these. ¹⁵ Truly I tell you, anyone who will not receive the kingdom of God like a little child will never enter it.” ¹⁶ And he took the children in his arms, placed his hands on them and blessed them.

SCRIPTURE SENTENCE

Romans 10:15 “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!”

INTRODUCTION



We have just hosted a splendid and beautiful Santa Land event and I extend a warm thank you and congratulations to all those who contributed.

You know I was told by a good number of people this is an event not to be missed, which shows a wonderful coming together of the church and community.

I was also told that questions are sometimes asked about the emphasis on Santa Claus ... and not Christ ... who is as we know the reason for the season.

Now as you are probably aware the story of Santa Claus comes from an ancient story, but interestingly it has its roots in a real person – a person we know as St. Nicholas.

And behind Santa's rosy-cheeked legend ... and reputation for treating children to expensive and exciting gifts ... is a somewhat horrific tale ... of one man's genuine care for children.

The truth is, St. Nicholas and Santa Claus are technically the same person.

St. Nicholas was a real, living person between the years 220 A.D. and 343 A.D. He was a Christian bishop, of Greek origin, during the time of the Roman Empire.

Very little is known about the historical Saint Nicholas. The earliest accounts of his life were written centuries after his death and contain many legendary elaborations.

He is said to have been born in the Greek seaport of Patara, Lycia in Asia Minor to wealthy Christian parents.

In one of the earliest attested and most famous incidents from his life, he is said to have rescued three girls from being forced into prostitution by dropping a sack of gold coins through the window of their house ... each night ... for three nights ... so their father could pay a dowry for each of them.

Other early stories tell of him calming a storm at sea, and saving three innocent soldiers from wrongful execution.

In his youth, he is said to have made a pilgrimage to Egypt and the land of Israel. Shortly after his return, he became Bishop of Myra.

He was later cast into prison during the persecution of Diocletian but was released after the accession of Constantine.

An early list makes him an attendee at the First Council of Nicaea in 325, but he is never mentioned in any writings by people who were at the council.

Late, unsubstantiated legends claim that he was temporarily defrocked and imprisoned during the council for slapping the heretic Arius.

Another famous late legend tells how he resurrected three children, who had been murdered and pickled in brine by a butcher planning to sell them as pork during a famine.

Fewer than 200 years after Nicholas's death, the St. Nicholas Church was built in Myra under the orders of Theodosius II ... over the site of the church where he had served as bishop, ... and his remains were moved to a sarcophagus in that church.

In 1087 ... while the Greek Christian inhabitants of the region were subjugated by the newly arrived Muslim Seljuk Turks ... and soon after their church ... was declared to be in schism by the Catholic church ... a group of merchants from the Italian city of Bari removed the major bones of Nicholas's skeleton from his sarcophagus in the church ... without authorization ... and brought them to their hometown ... where they are now enshrined in the Basilica di San Nicola.

The remaining bone fragments from the sarcophagus were later removed by Venetian sailors and taken to Venice during the First Crusade.

A SUMMARY

Born Traditionally 15 March 270, Patara,
Roman Empire

Died Traditionally 6 December 343 (aged
73) Myra, Roman Empire

Venerated in all Christian denominations
which venerate saints

Major shrine is Basilica di San Nicola, Bari,
Italy

Feast 5/6 December in Western Christianity;
19 December in Eastern Christianity (main
feast day – Saint Nicholas Day)

Vested as a Bishop. In Eastern Christianity,
wearing an omophorion and holding a Gospel
Book. Sometimes shown with Jesus Christ

over one shoulder, holding a Gospel Book, and with the Theotokos over the other shoulder, holding an omophorion, holding three golden balls or coins.

Patronage. Children, coopers, sailors, fishermen, merchants, broadcasters, the falsely accused, repentant thieves, brewers, pharmacists, archers, pawnbrokers, unmarried people, Aberdeen, Galway, Russia, Greece, Hellenic Navy, Liverpool, Bari, Siggiewi, Moscow, Amsterdam, Lorraine, Royal School of Church Music and Duchy of Lorraine, students in various cities and countries around Europe.

So, today I would like to talk about the call of God on our lives ... and perhaps especially ... on your life ... being mindful of St Nicholas' quite remarkable life.

Now a very poignant and transformative scripture helps us this morning and I should like to draw your attention to it again: Romans 10:12-15

12 For there is no difference between Jew and Gentile—the same Lord is Lord of all and richly blesses all who call on him, 13 for, “Everyone who calls on the name of the Lord will be saved.”

14 How, then, can they call on the one they have not believed in? And how can they believe in the one of whom they have not heard? And how can they hear without someone preaching to them? 15 And how can anyone preach unless they are sent? As it is written: “How beautiful are the feet of those who bring good news!” – and this last verse is today's scripture sentence.

I think Nicholas understood this passage very well.

He knew that for God to redeem the world ... and to restore humanity to himself ... in a living and vital relationship ... God calls people to preach ... to proclaim ... to persuade ... women and men ... young people and children ... from all nations ... to turn to him ... in faith and repentance.

And, of course, the divine imperative involves caring for human need.

Now, we can see this quite clearly in this morning's Old Testament lesson from Isaiah, where you will notice ... a twofold mission of proclamation ... and service: they are two sides of the one coin.

**The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,
because the Lord has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the
prisoners,**

**² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,
³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.**

By prophetic declaration, Isaiah ... the Servant of the Lord ... sees the vision, states the mission, and sets the tone for a redemptive ministry.

Perhaps few job descriptions have been more detailed in its scope or demanding in its impact.

And the fact that Jesus quoted this passage for the announcement of his public ministry (Luke 4:17–19) ... confirms the connection between Isaiah's prophecy and Christ's fulfilment.

We should note how the text from Isaiah can be analysed ... according to requirements for writing a task description ... and perhaps is a model for others to follow:

His Mandate:

“The Spirit of the Lord GOD is upon Me”

His Motivation:

“The LORD has anointed Me:

His Method:

“to preach”

His Message:

“good tidings”

His Market:

“the poor... broken-hearted ... captives ...
those who are bound”

His Measure or scope:

“Preach good tidings to the poor ... heal the broken-hearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound”

His Ultimate Message:

“to proclaim the acceptable year of the LORD and the day of vengeance of our God”

OK, ... so what can we learn from the life of St Nicholas, and from Isaiah 61?

What was the message really about?

What was the proclamation?

**FIRSTLY, IT WAS A PROCLAMATION OF
FREEDOM TO LIVE**

You see Israel in Isaiah’s time still covered in fear under the shadow of death.

All of the symptoms of a funeral hung over them—the symbol of ashes, the sound of mourning, and the spirit of heaviness (v. 3a).

Their self-esteem had bottomed out. Not only did they suffer the indignity of being considered a “worm” by other nations, but they had come to believe it themselves.

First and foremost, then, Israel needed ... freedom from its fears ... and restoration ... to the joy of living.

Allow me to make a bold statement, I believe self-esteem ... is not a quality of life ... that can be artificially created ... by external achievements of fame ... or fortune.

Howard Hughes, for example, a genius for making airplanes, movies, and money, became a recluse cowering in the dark with his own fears.

Kiss-and-tell biographies of famous people, who we admire for their self-confidence ... often expose the insecurities of their personal lives ... and their lonely private moments.

Psychiatrists tell us that the most common dream of highly successful people ... is apparently the fear of falling from a cliff or a high building.

Inwardly, people often know the higher they rise, the further they can fall.

Outwardly, they are citadels of self-esteem, but inwardly, they are “nurseries of hidden fears,” as **CS Lewis** described himself before his conversion.

Understandably, then, Isaiah begins with inner transformation.

We notice that Isaiah gives us ... a comparative picture of a person ... who is prepared for a funeral ... and one who is dressed for a wedding.

The symbol of ashes, the sound of mourning, and the spirit of heaviness ... are appropriate for a funeral.

You see ... Israel suffered these symptoms ... because the people had given up ... and considered themselves as good as dead.

But the “good tidings” preached by Isaiah will change all of that.

Isaiah returns to his favourite image of a beautiful bride - Zion - to illustrate his point.

Imagine a woman ... dressed for a funeral ... who receives the message ... that an error has been made.

The announcement of death ... should have been ... an invitation to a wedding.

Immediately, she washes the ashes from her face ... puts on her makeup ... and crowns her head with a garland of flowers.

Ugly ashes of death ... have given way to ... a beautiful crown of life.

Something also happened to the sound she makes.

Sympathetic moans are fitting for a funeral ... but joyous humming and excited chatter ... precede a wedding.

Isaiah likens this change to Zion as putting on ... perfumed body oil ... that gives off the delicate sense of inner joy.

Then, instead of the rough and torn sackcloth that expresses the heaviness of soul in mourning ...

Zion puts on an exquisite wedding dress ... as the “garment of praise” ...

to symbolize the emergence of a transformed character.

She is now the beautiful bride ... dressed for her wedding ... not the sad mourner ... heading for her own funeral.

And when Jesus takes up this passage to describe ... his holy call and ministry ... he is talking about you and me.

He is offering us the freedom and power to live.

**SECONDLY, THE PROCLAMATION WAS
FREEDOM TO SERVE**

You see, I believe when we are free to live, we are free to serve.

I wonder if some people who lack self-esteem ... tend to be self-centred ... in their motivation ... and in their engagement with other people.

Maybe in their life's struggle ... they don't want to take the risk ... of giving themselves away ... for the sake of others.

Perhaps they fear rejection ... the cost of service ... or the bitterness and resentment of past experience ... which immobilises them in the present ... and for the future.

Now there are two forces that can influence the direction of travel our lives.

- Centrifugal force moves us outwardly ... away from the centre of our lives ... in service to others
- Centripetal force moves us inwardly ... toward the centre of our lives ... in service of ourselves

Now, I am not talking here about ... the inner life of prayer and self-care ... but of self-interest which may be subject to increasing intensity.

A vicious cycle is often created in which self-interest ... creates a poverty of spirit ... rather than a fulfilled life.

Apparently, equity theory in psychology, believes self-interest motivates all human behaviour. Do you believe that? I am not sure I do.

However, they say even acts of charity ... are explained by the motivation that we give ... only as we receive.

Well, Isaiah defies the law of self-interest by foreseeing that freedom to serve is the natural outworking ... of the freedom to live ... as God restores our life.

Acting out of a newfound self-esteem ... Isaiah says ... they can become known as the “**Priests**

**of the LORD” and the “Servants of our God”
(v. 6).**

In gratitude for the grace given to them ... they become servants ... and a channel of grace for others.

Now, servanthood is never easy. In Isaiah ... the job description calls for them to **“rebuild the old ruins,” “raise up the former desolations,” and “repair the ruined cities” (v. 4).**

And, as we are transformed from ... a mourner in ashes to ... a bride of beauty, we also notice we will work with rejects ... with failures ... with outcasts ... with the broken ... and the lost ... both in body and in soul.

And, of course, Jesus set the example.

He transformed

- a tax collector into a disciple,

- a prostitute into a saint,
- a sceptic into an apostle,
- a madman into a family man,

And St Nicholas ... learnt to serve the community and individuals ... who were ruined and devastated by personal and social sin.

As a bishop, God used him to **“rebuild the old ruins,” “raise up the former desolations,” and “repair the ruined cities”**

Is it too much to ask today ... that after his example ... and to be true to our servant role ... we must look ... “Where are the ruins that need to be rebuilt ... and the desolate places that need new life?”

**THIRDLY, THE PROCLAMATION WAS
FREEDOM TO CELEBRATE**

OK, what do we mean by celebrate?

What does a great celebration look and feel like do you think?

And perhaps ... you might agree with me ... that not everyone can celebrate ... or will want to?

Now in their doubt and despair, the children of Israel ... had sunk into mourning ... with its symbol of ashes ... and its spirit of heaviness.

Their social gatherings and religious feasts ... were more like a funeral than a wedding.

But through the ministry of the Servant ... Isaiah says ... all was to change.

According to Isaiah, the children of Israel will celebrate a wedding ... rather than commiserate at a funeral.

Rather than being represented by the symbol of a withered reed (42:3) ... they will be like a fresh

green shoot ... that springs up overnight in a fertile garden.

As an illustration let me talk about how cocktail parties ... promise to be fun and exciting ... but sometimes I found ... they turned out to be ... dreary and tedious.

I confess cocktail parties confound me.

In my official duties as a chaplain in the British Army ... I attended numerous receptions ... and cocktails parties ... in a number of different contexts and nations.

In the spirit of celebration ... the participants raise a toast and clink their glasses ... but after a drink or two ... the conversation focusses on small talk ... and carefully crafted conversation ... avoiding anything of substance ... interest ... and pregnant with nuance and understatement.

You may not be surprised ... that I was often bored speechless ... although I liked the food ... and depending on the occasion ... the quality of the wine.

Never did I leave ... a cocktail reception ... with a joyous sense of celebration.

In contrast to the intent ... I found them awkward ... and sometimes artificial occasions.

However ... by contrast ... worship services that are graced by the presence of the Holy Spirit ... are just the opposite ... irrespective of whether you know the people or not.

With clear heads and open hearts ... we come together to celebrate our freedom in Christ ... to praise God for his grace and glory.

You see Isaiah expands upon the preparation for a wedding ... the most joyous of human events ...

to communicate what it means for us ... the Church ... to celebrate our freedom.

So, we read the bride prepared for her wedding by

- putting on the garland of beauty,
- the oil of joy,
- and the garment of praise.

God, you see ... desires ... and will inspire ...
God will provide ... the same spirit of celebration
for us. Alleluia.

Clothed as the bride:

- in the garments of righteousness,
- adorned with the jewels of selfless servanthood,
- we will be radiant with the glow of God's glory

I think this is what the life of St Nicholas looked like ... don't you?

Over to us now ... as we worship here in
Cromwell Presbyterian Church, Central Otago,
New Zealand.

Allow me to close by saying ... recall the wonder
and delight of Santa Land ... consider the
remarkable life of St Nicholas ... reflect upon the
promise of the prophet Isaiah ... and be inspired
by our Lord Jesus Christ.

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

AMEN