

John 1 1-14 ( Isaiah 52, 7-10 & Heb 1 1-4) St M & AA Audio 24/12/20



May I speak in the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

‘How Beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace.....’

I wonder when it was that any of us last looked at a pair of feet and thought, "How Beautiful"? Certainly in both Old and New Testament times feet were seen as being ritually unclean and even today you can get a severe rebuke in the Holy Land for showing any part of the soles of your feet. Which left me thinking are feet ever beautiful?

Well after a little reflection I came to the conclusion that yes of course, they are! What led me to this conclusion was the birth of our first grandchild Ezra; though we have not been able to visit them in Austin Texas and actually hold him, the pictures and zoom calls we have with Robert, Kirsty and Ezra have reminded me of how I used to cuddle my own sons as babies and gently caress their hands and feet, so fragile and soft.

However, beauty in the greatest sense of the word must never be aligned to mere physicality. In the passage from Isaiah the beauty to which it refers, I believe, is less about physical form, and more about function and all about context.

A mother's feet, rushing across the landing to comfort a child afraid of the dark..... beautiful!

A bride's feet, in step with her father's, as they walk slowly down the aisle.....beautiful!

A babies feet being brushed with paint and applied to paper on the day of birth.....beautiful!

A child taking their first steps. ....Beautiful!

The feet of coffin bearers carefully stepping forwards taking a loved one on their final journey....yes even in death beauty!

It is what they are doing, the context of the feet, that makes them beautiful. Beautiful like Isaiah's feet on messengers bringing good news. Feet are beautiful because of whom they carry, because of what they bring. This is 'Beautiful' in context.

And what about Isaiah and the feet upon the mountains? What are they bringing? What do they carry? What's the message? "See your salvation," Isaiah is saying "Look up from those feet and see the beauty of what's coming. See your salvation!"

Yet even this message, even this beautiful message of salvation is beautiful because of context.

When is good news so good that you would even praise the news-bringer's feet? Well, when you've had nothing but bad news and you're starved to hear some good.

When do you need a message of peace, of comfort, of salvation? When what you've had is war and strife and misery.

Isaiah's audience is Judah. Well, what's left of Judah in exile, in Babylon. The homeland, the holy land, is in ruins. The people are scattered. Many were taken to Babylon itself as servants and slaves. They are miles from home, among their enemies, and they have no hope to save themselves.

The context is what makes the message and the feet that carry it beautiful. God gives his exiled people good news; they will be his again, He never stopped being theirs. *"How beautiful on the mountains are the feet of those who bring [such] good news!"* And we say, "How nice for them! It's great that God would do that for them. Isaiah's message must have been so beautiful to them. It's a nice, great, feel-good message for us to hear at Christmas!"

Normally I suspect we might have thought this message is just for them. Not for us, we're not starved of good news. It's Christmas. We're swimming in good news. We're enjoying the time off from work that we've earned, to give and receive the presents that we bought, and eat the food we've prepared, with the family we love, we have all we need. So on Christmas we come and listen to Isaiah, but we have to imagine having it so rough that Isaiah's word would be truly beautiful. And we feel good about imagining that we see beauty in this message to those back then.

But this year maybe this passage bears a more personal emphasis. We have not been able to live life as normal, our daily lives both at home and work have been disrupted beyond our modern day imagining. We have been estranged from our communities, friends and families. Our ways of worship have had to change and adapt to a world that seems so unfamiliar. Indeed the grounds on which both our worldly and faith identities are built have been shaken. We like Judah have had a wake up call!

Isaiah's first audience, the people of Judah, were much the same. They had fallen off track with their relationship with God, but the other gods and idols are filling in the gap nicely, just as today consumerism, self and idolatry fills the gaps God once held. What do they need of redemption? What do they need of salvation? More the question what do we need of redemption and salvation. Judah could very well have read Isaiah and said pretty much what we just did: that these words sound nice, but they are not really for us.

So often we let anything and everything take priority over our relationship with God, and not just when things are good but when things are bad too, walking further away from God. We take what God gives us and call it "Mine" or even "Not enough" and we lie to ourselves and act like we don't need God or his redemption. As Cardinal Basil Hume said "There is darkness within each one of us that needs to be dispelled by the light which Christ brings".

This is the context of Isaiah's message. And so, that's exactly what makes this message so beautiful. He says. "Listen! Look! See your salvation!" To the Word we listen, to God's Word. The Word that reveals us as we are.

But more, the Word that speaks of comfort and peace, of grace and of truth. We listen to the Word, God's Word, and with every word the message is Jesus.

At God's word we look, and what do we see? The Word made flesh! Yes, we are lost and helpless to save ourselves, so the Word became flesh; God himself, the maker of all things, the Lord of the universe. The Alpha and the Omega, took on flesh, was dependant on a virgin mother and was born in a humble stable, wrapped in swaddling bands, and placed in a manger. Why? So that we could see him! We look at that baby and we see our God. We look at that baby and we see our salvation. We look at that baby and we see the miracle that God became man to save all people. We see Jesus Christ.

As we receive anew the gift of the Christ child this Christmas may our gift to God be a promise to not go back to our old ways. May we continue to see the beauty of the feet of the nurse standing beside the bed of one who is dying in greater glory than the feet of a footballer. The feet of the ecologist take priority over that of the developer. The feet carrying compassion out walk the need of self, and the footsteps of God guide us away from the demands of this world; for this is where the beauty and light of Christ walks. For the feet of the Christ child we watch over today are the same feet that walk to the cross for us.

*“How beautiful upon the mountains are the feet of the messenger who announces peace, who brings good news, who announces salvation.”*  
Amen

Acknowledgments –

Beautiful Feet by Pastor Ethan Cherney

The Gift Of Being Yourself by David G. Benner

The Mystery Of Love by Cardinal Basil Hume