

**St. Ninian's Parish Church**  
**Sunday 8<sup>th</sup> December 2019**

*Isaiah 11: 1 - 10*

While delivering the church's Christmas cards around the doors of our parish, I've noticed the rise in the number of households that have electronic doorbells with camera on them so that whether a homeowner is at home, or at the office, or anywhere where there is a mobile phone signal, he or she can look at their phone and see an image of who is ringing the doorbell.

Cameras like these are a good thing, they help to keep us safe. But, they also remind us of the growth in our society of electronic images and pictures of people, of us, that are publicly available. These images are most often found on the internet on social media sites like Facebook for example. Recently, the BBC used this growth of publicly available images to make a clever, compelling and popular thriller called *Capture*, which aired in October.

The premise of this six-episode drama was the manipulation of the images and sound found on the internet of people like us. By manipulating the images that we broadcast freely of ourselves, the characters and organisations in the film were able to frame individuals for crimes and misrepresent their intentions. That premise was clever, the plot of *Capture* was thrilling, the episodes were dramatic, and the message of the series was, don't trust everything you see and hear on a screen, it might have been manipulated.

'He shall not judge by what he sees nor decide by what he hears...'<sup>1</sup> prophesied Isaiah in our Old Testament reading this morning. 'He shall not judge by what he sees nor decide by what he hears...'

The image of our faces and the sound of our voices, which have always been on show, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century are on show in ways we have less and less control over. The images of our faces and the sounds of our voices are no longer our own. Whether it is Fake News or the manipulation of social media posts, what we see and what we hear isn't necessarily what was really done or what was really said.

For the most part, I imagine there is little to worry about, if we retain a critical attitude. It has always been important to treat what we see, hear and read with a critical attitude. Gossip is as old as humanity, for example. There have always been people who seek to manipulate our opinions of others. Newspapers, which have been part of our daily life for centuries, aren't always accurate. Some studies show that as many as 60% of articles contain errors of misquotation, number calculation, or particularly in the headline.<sup>2</sup> Things improve over time; weekly newspapers are considerably more accurate than dailies.

This truth, that what we see and hear does not always represent the truth is particularly important when the stakes are high.

'He shall not judge by what he sees nor decide by what he hears...' This week when it comes to judging by what we see or deciding on the basis of what we hear, the stakes are high. How will you decide whom to vote for, how will you make your judgement?

In Isaiah's day the stakes were often high, particularly for the king; everyone wanted to portray themselves in front of him in the best light, which made decision making and judgement particularly difficult. Isaiah's hope was that one day there would be a ruler, a king, a Messiah

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<sup>1</sup> Isa 11: 3

<sup>2</sup> <http://jonathanstray.com/measuring-and-increasing-accuracy-in-journalism>

who would be able to see through the fake images presented before him, and ignore the gossip whispered in his ear, and so be able to judge with justice, particularly when it came to cases involving those who were most likely to be the victims of foul play: the poor and the humble.

For Isaiah, this promised saviour would be one who was guided by principle and faith rather than image and accusation. Rather than being guided by what he saw and heard, the Messiah would be guided by a holiness of spirit:

'The spirit of the Lord shall rest upon him,  
A spirit of wisdom and understanding,  
A spirit of counsel and power,  
A spirit of knowledge and fear of the Lord.'<sup>3</sup>

I wonder whether this coming week we might find it helpful to seek guidance from the spirit of the Lord; to be guided in our decision by our Christian principals, and to judge those we are voting for by the principals they appear to hold themselves?

After all, Isaiah argued that because the Messiah would be guided by spiritual principle and faithful witness, then 'round his waist ... [he would] wear the belt of justice, and good faith [would] be the girdle round his body'<sup>4</sup> so that he would '...judge the poor with justice [and] defend the humble in the land with equity.'<sup>5</sup> That sounds like a manifesto worth signing-up to.

Of course, this week we are not only looking forward to voting, we are continuing, in Advent, to look forward to the celebration of the birth of the very person Isaiah was talking about, Jesus Christ. And in that regard, it is remarkable just how prescient was Isaiah's reporting of who the Messiah would be.

If there is a consistent theme in all four Gospels, it is that Jesus never judged just by what he saw nor made a decision based only on what he heard. Lepers, for example, the sight of which repelled people and forced them to conclude that evil lurked there, were welcomed by Jesus with open arms, literally. He didn't judge a leper by what he saw, he judged a leper with a spirit of wisdom and understanding.

When people whispered in Jesus' ear that some women were of ill-repute, that tax collectors were not the sort of people to dine with, and that the poor had brought it all on themselves, Jesus ignored what he was hearing, and made his decisions guided by a spirit of counsel and power, irrespective of how much power the gossips wielded themselves.

When even his disciples boasted out loud to him about their bravery, loyalty and their faith he raised a sceptical eyebrow, saw their bragging for what it was, fake news, and was guided about their likely intentions not by what he was hearing from them, but by a spirit of knowledge and his fear of the Lord. They all fled from him in the end, as he knew they would.

The faith Jesus had, the principles he followed, and his scepticism of what he saw and heard, led him to stand full-square on the side of those who suffered the most in his society, as Isaiah predicted; those whose voices were least often heard and those who had the fewest opportunities in life: the poor and the humble. This week, as we continue to celebrate Advent, we should be guided by Jesus' example and look to our faith and Christians principals for help in our making judgements and decisions.

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<sup>3</sup> Isa 11; 2

<sup>4</sup> Isa 11; 5

<sup>5</sup> Isa 11: 4

Most importantly though, this week, we should pay heed to something else we heard in Isaiah's words this morning when he was prophesying about what sort of person the Messiah would be. Isaiah said,

'His mouth shall be a rod to strike down the ruthless, and with a word he shall slay the wicked.'

These words sound aggressive and violent with their talk of slaying and striking down. But, in fact they are an inspiring message of peace. Isaiah said that the Messiah will strike down not with a sword, but with his mouth, and will slay not with a spear, but with words. The Sermon on the Mount is just one example. There was Jesus, Isaiah's prophesied Messiah, seeking to turn his society on its head, with the words from his mouth and the force of his argument.

Even in societies like Isaiah's and ours, societies where you can't always trust what you see and hear, is there a better description of how a democracy should function? Battles are fought using words not bullets; decisions are made by force of argument, not by coercion and fear. Even though we can't always trust what we see and hear, aren't words from our mouths that aim to persuade and convince better than force wielded by our fists and worse?

'His *mouth* shall be a rod to strike down the ruthless, and with a *word* he shall slay the wicked.'

Whatever you are doing this week, whether you are celebrating Advent or voting in an election, remember these words of Isaiah that seek to guide you spiritually, and give thanks to the God who came amongst us in Jesus Christ that we live in a society where power is at the mercy of words and the ballot box, not enforced by the gun and the tyrant.