

St. Bride's Church of Scotland, Newtonmore

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ANOINTING

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Isaiah 30:15-22

1 John 2:15-29

If you go to a posh restaurant, or maybe I should say a pretentious one, one of these places where there is a short story attached to every menu item, you may well find that certain dishes are described as being “anointed” with this or that condiment, usually some kind of oil. And maybe you are a cook and know what that means – that a little of this flavouring has been rubbed onto the meat – or maybe you don't really care, and just ignore the pretentious description to order your meal. This passage from John's letter is all about anointing, and it is far more exciting than a menu, for even the best food.

You could be forgiven, if, as we read the passage. You did not notice that anointing was a major theme. That is because in English translations it is hidden in religious language. But you will have noticed that there are many references to Christ, to Jesus the Christ and to antichrist. Now Christ is the Greek version of the Hebrew word Messiah, and both mean the one who is anointed.

In the ancient world anointing was used in two ways. There was anointing with prayer for healing – a Jewish practice which the early church adopted. The idea was not that the oil used in the prayers was in any way magical – the idea of some *thing* having powers always brings us into the realm of magic. However, in this case the oil for anointing was used along with the prayers, in the same kind of way that candles are used in some traditions, to be a visible sign of the prayers that are offered. So when a person is described as anointed it could mean that they are prayed for, that they have been given healing.

But the other way that anointing was used, as it still is in our own society, was at a coronation, where God's seal and approval is indicated by the rubbing of oil on the monarch's forehead. And when we are talking about Christ or Messiah, that is the kind of anointing that is indicated. The Messiah is the one anointed by God as King, as ruler, given authority. And that Messiah, that anointed one is Jesus.

Well, you know that. We talk about it every Christmas, and people sing Handel's Messiah which makes just that point. You know that. Jesus is the Messiah, the Christ, anointed by God.

The problem which John was addressing in his letter, and it is a problem which did not end in the first century, was that there were those who also knew that, or had been taught it, those who were, or had been, members of the church community, for whom this truth was not enough. In the Jewish world there were constantly people cropping up who claimed to be the Messiah, or were hailed by others as such. And in the Greco-Roman world there were always people popping up with some new political movement. Indeed the political and religious were completely intertwined. No

movement to overthrow the Roman empire or to bolster it would be thought possible if God or the gods were not invoked.

In John's community there were people who had been keen to come to hear the news of Jesus the Messiah, who had then left when something more exciting came up. They left and in leaving they implicitly or explicitly said that Jesus was *not* God's anointed leader. Later in the letter we will see that for some of them the problem they had was the idea that God's Son and Christ could be a human being, someone with as solid a body as they and we have. For others, it was just that the faith centred around Jesus became old hat and not as new and exciting as what was happening over there – wherever "there" was at that moment. John calls these people anti-christs, or anti-messiahs because they were against the truth of who Jesus really is.

When I was working with a Methodist Church in Suburban Chicago in the 1990s, one of my tasks was to lead a group of older teenagers, who met on a Sunday night. Their pattern was that they did various activities each week, and one week each month they had a Bible Study. At the time of the first Gulf War they asked that they be allowed to study the Book of Revelation. So that is what we did. We were quite a bit of the way through when one of them asked "When do we find Saddam in this?" They had heard that the book of Revelation was about Saddam Hussein, which was why they had wanted to study it! (It has always been amazing what you can hear from the US media.) Reflecting with the other leaders afterwards we concluded that since undoubtedly Revelation mentions an Antichrist figure, and many people at that time were calling Saddam an Antichrist, so two and two had been put together.

Antichrist is a phrase which John uses quite a lot, and it has, perhaps, become less than helpful over the years, as it has entered common usage to mean the perpetrator of outrage. As we consider what we read and what it says to us, it might be better if we think of that difficult term the way that John would have thought of it – Anti-Messiah. And we want to get to the nub of what John is saying, because running under and through the words we read today is a stream of hope and comfort and reassurance.

What John wants his readers to understand, and that includes us, is that nothing can be more wonderful or exciting or fulfilling than following Jesus as the Messiah, anointed by God. I said that this passage was all about anointing, and so it is. John is writing about more than a dispute about whether or not Jesus was really the Messiah, he is writing about what it means to have fellowship with God, something he talked of earlier in his letter. You see, twice in these verses, at verse 20 and then again at verse 27, John refers to *our* anointing. Our anointing by God. He says that this anointing is the gift of the Holy Spirit, and that it gives us knowledge of what is really true. But most important of all, he says that we are anointed! What does that mean?

Well, on one level it means that we are those who have been prayed for and to whom God's healing has been extended. This ties in with what John has already reminded us about how our sins are forgiven and washed away. That in itself, as we have reflected, is glory enough! But the other meaning of anointing is to show God's choosing, God's favour, God's making royal. If we are anointed of God, then we have become his chosen ones, just as Jesus was his chosen one. We have God's Spirit within us, just as Jesus had. We are not God's firstborn, the Saviour, but we are called to be with him in his work in the world, called with the same calling and the same anointing that he had. We have his Spirit within us, so that we can hear his voice teaching and directing us, even as Isaiah promised so long ago. This is John

re-visiting what he has already said about how our fellowship, our family partnership is not only with each other but also, wonderfully, with God himself. He is re-visiting it, and he is showing us another side, another layer of wonder.

There is hope, you see, and comfort, and reassurance.

The people in John's community knew what we have also known, people who they had loved and who had worshipped with them had been drawn away from their fellowship, from the bonds of love which God had put into their hearts, which in obedience to his command they had learned to work out with each other. When they got together they saw blanks, they saw gaps, they remembered people who no longer came to worship with them. And it hurt. And in the hurting was the question – are they right? Is this Jesus movement really the truth, the right way to follow? Many of us have had such questions at the back of our minds at times, and especially when friends have left the church for one reason or another.

This is John's answer. How can there be anything more important, more true, and more exciting, when you are anointed by God, in the pattern of Jesus, the Messiah? How can there be anything more important, more true and more exciting, when you are made royal, when you are made holy, when you are made brothers and sisters, not only of each other, but of Jesus, God's firstborn, our saviour, himself? This is what it means when we take the bread and the wine to remember Jesus' body and blood. We are in communion with God, with God himself – where are you going to go to experience anything more profound?

We do all need reassurance, we do all need to know that what we believe and the one we follow is the right way, and John tells us that it is. What he is saying is "You are doing it right. You are doing it right, even if what you are doing changes, so long as you are part of the incarnation, part of those what are messiah-ed by God's Spirit and hold fast to the truth that Jesus, who was human, is the Son of God the one anointed by God, the Messiah. You are doing it right." And when the world calls that there is another truth, that there is a more exciting way, that there is a new movement which will bring nirvana, you do not follow them, because you are immersed in the anointing and the anointed one of God. We are in communion with him. Halleluia! Amen.

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