

Isaiah 61

John 1:6-8, 19-28

Introduction

It's hard to believe that it is just a year ago that Boris Johnson and the Conservative party were returned to power at the general election. So much has happened since that it feels like a very long time. At that election Boris's message was simple. 'Let's get Brexit done'. He offered other things as well but his manifesto, his public declaration of intent, was very simple and focused on one main object. Manifestos are very helpful because they enable us to know what the priorities of a public figure or politician are and help us to hold them to account if they don't deliver on their promises.

The passage from Isaiah 61 is what you might call a double manifesto. It is one of the so called "servant songs from Isaiah" where the anointed one or "Messiah" is described and his role prophesied. He speaks in his own person about himself and his God given ministry, the theme of which is transformation. It is this passage or at least, part of it that the Lord Jesus deliberately used at the starting point of his public ministry to declare his mission and ministry to the people.

When he read the passage in the synagogue the Lord stopped at the words "the Lord's favour (2a) and didn't proceed to "the day of vengeance." So he expressed his understanding of his own mission at that point which was not to condemn but to save the world. He was aware, though, of a time that would come when he would sit in judgement on the whole world as its risen and ascended saviour and judge.

This passage is very well known and seems to me to express the heart of the Gospel - the Good News we have to proclaim. It is a passage at the heart of my understanding of prayer ministry. That God has come amongst us to save us and to transform us and it is a transformation that we can expect today as much as those who listened to Isaiah's prophesy or those who listened to Jesus in the Synagogue or in the course of his ministry could. This is a statement for all time of what God wants to do for the people that he created and loves. It

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talks of God's transforming power in the present and in the future.

A transformed people (vv 1-4)

The servant proclaims that the spirit of the Sovereign Lord, Yahweh is upon him so that he can work the works of God.

And the works of God are to:

- 1** *preach Good news to the poor*
- 2** *bind up the broken hearted*
- 3** *proclaim freedom for the captives*
- 4** *and release from darkness for the prisoners*
- 5** *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*

This is where Jesus stopped in his "manifesto" as in his first coming he was there to bring salvation not condemnation and judgement is to be saved until he returns again in glory as our Saviour and our Judge.

Jesus came to minister to the downtrodden, the disadvantaged, those held back from progress and the chance of improvement by people or circumstances. He came to "bind up" to give personal attention to those who are damaged, to heal and to restore them to wholeness; Broken hearted covers any and every human breakdown from emotional collapse to conviction of sin. Proclaim freedom echoes the message of Leviticus of the release from bondage and debt given by the Jubilee year and the words "the year of the Lord's favour" furthers the idea that the Anointed one comes in an appointed time to reset all things and to release debtors and slaves. Captives and prisoners describe bondage imposed firstly by people and secondly by place, the contrast implying release of every sort.

So the Good news embraces personal renewal and restoration, release from restrictions imposed by people and the correction of circumstances that have caused injustice and imprisonment. Those who mourn will be comforted, every cause of sorrow will be removed and the sadness will be transformed into beauty

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and gladness. There is a sense in which the mourning is connected with personal grief about the sins we have committed in the same way they are connected by Jesus in the beatitudes.

This is wonderful news for us as God's children and followers of Christ. These are the things he came to bring us. The important question we need to ask is have we experienced this transformation in our lives and if not why not?

Well let's look a little more closely at how these things can or should work out in practice:

1 *preach Good news to the poor*

What is the Good news that the poor need to hear? What is God's message to them? It is that the poor are important to God, he cares about them and wants to protect them. God's priorities and values are almost completely opposite to the values of the world. Power is given to people in order to care for the world and its people. It isn't given to be used for our own ends or abused in order to make individuals wealthy or to control others for our own purposes. In our world wealth and status are important and the poor can be ignored and dismissed. Jesus' priority is to care for those on the margins of society, to deal with injustice and to make this world a fairer place. It should be our priority as well.

2 *bind up the broken hearted*

I've said that the words and context imply the healing of any form of human breakdown from personal collapse to conviction of sin. What might be needed in order for God to bind up the broken hearted? Well firstly we have to recognize our need for healing and then be willing to trust God to deal gently with our hurts and pain. God is not satisfied with leaving his people damaged and wounded. He wants to heal us and we need to be willing to bring our hurts to God for him to deal with and transform. As Christians we need to offer healing to others as well.

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3 *proclaim freedom for the captives*

What sort of things hold us captive? We can be held captive by the past, by fear, by addictions and ambitions.

4 *and release from darkness for the prisoners*

In the last year our world has felt at times like a very dark place. We increasingly see the effect our actions and life choices have had on the world around us. We have seen the power of this invisible virus to destroy our whole way of life, and we see the effects of war and violence on individual lives. All these things make life seem very dark as does trying to live our lives apart from God. As Christians we have a wonderful message of hope and love but do we proclaim it in a way that people hear and receive it?

5 *to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*

Jesus told his audience in the Synagogue "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing". I think that although we hear of the amazing things Jesus did for the people he met and ministered to while he was on earth we have little expectation that these things apply to ourselves. - but why not. Jesus came to introduce a new era - the age of salvation and healing for the human race. This was increased, not decreased by his resurrection and ascension into heaven. These things are as available for us today as they were then. We simply need to expect them, to seek them and to place ourselves in God's hands and ask him to provide them for us.

This is the thinking behind the fact that we have tried to have prayer ministry in our churches. And in the new year once we are worshipping more normally I plan to reintroduce it in new ways. Jesus came to bring restoration and healing to each and every one of us. It is there for us to receive. There are areas that we constantly struggle with because we either don't expect God to transform and restore them or we don't allow him to.

Let's spend a moment or two to consider if there is any area of our lives that we would like our Lord to transform and renew.

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Let's simply bring that area to our Lord and saviour remembering that he died on the cross to bring transformation to our lives and has power over life and death. Let's simply place ourselves and this area of our lives in his hands and ask him to bring renewal and restoration.