

### ADVENT WEEK 3: Isaiah 61:1-11 (Luke 4:14-22) 'Bind the broken' – God restores

Lectionary – don't get to choose what preach on. Sometimes lucky – get one of my favourite passages, like this one. (Anyone else?) Look at today – **message in 3 dimensions, message of hope, message for everyone.**

In many ways, I've spent much of the last fifteen years wrestling with this passage, and I suspect, much of the rest of my ministerial life. For me, it's one of those profound pieces of teaching which seems so simple, so obvious, and yet so extraordinarily difficult and complicated at the same time.

Who likes watching films in 3D? I remember taking my kids to watch a 3D film for the first time in 2008 before we left London – **SLIDE** (big glasses, those were days.... – not like Buddy Holly ones now). It was one of those sea adventures with fishes swimming around. And it was almost as much fun watching my kids watching the film as the film itself. Every time a fish came near... (ACTION) Actually, I probably did that a few times myself... But I think this passage is just like that – every time you think you've got it.... (ACTION) – it's always just out of your reach.

My own journey with this passage I think is quite instructive. When I first came across it, I was at a conservative church, and lo and behold, the emphasis was on proclamation. 'Proclaim (v1)... proclaim (v1)... proclaim (v2).' As my own spiritual journey moved towards understanding and appropriating the work of the Spirit, well just look at this passage again: 'Spirit (begins v1)... anointed'. Then I started to get more involved in social action and justice issues, and the focus moves again – it's really all about the poor, about the oppressed, not just words or anointing but action. Freedom for the captives, release for the prisoners.

You can see what's happening here – the risk with every passage is that we read into it what we want to read, to suit our agenda. I'm a very slow learner, but if I've grasped one thing about this manifesto, it's this: our message is a **3-dimensional message** – it's about the word, the spirit and active compassion. But why does this matter? Why can't we just allow each church to do what it does best – to let the word churches be wordy, the spirit Christians be spirty (spiritual?) and the justice Christians be justicy (just!)?

Well, apart from the obvious fact that it reduces the full force of Jesus' own teaching – it's what he quotes as his manifesto in Luke 4 – I believe there are some bigger issues at stake. You see the church has a problem... What we face today is a growing credibility gap. Where are the sources of authority in our culture, where do people go? Well I think it's like this (**SLIDE**) – if you want rational thought, of course you wouldn't go to the church (as if!), you'll go the scientists. Sadly, the church is no longer seen as a thought leader on anything anymore.

But what about if you're a spiritual seeker? Well, as John Drane has commented (BOOK), lots of people now reject the church it is perceived as unspiritual. If you want to connect with the spiritual, you'll go to the New Age movement. You can even get it on the NHS. Finally, when you think social action and transformation, what do most people think next? NGOs. Oxfam, people like that. The fact that most of the biggest were set up by Christians doesn't register with people. The church is caught in the middle, isolated from all of them.

And the problem is, that is largely our fault (SLIDE): we've been preaching a 1-dimensional message. Conservative churches have been thumping the pulpit about the gospel and ignoring the poor and refusing to let God be God with his Spirit. Charismatic churches have been giving people lots of lovely times with Jesus and failing to teach people the bible and reducing transformation only to physical healing. Liberals have tried serving the poor in their own strength but forgotten that real transformational power is only found in the Word and the Spirit of God. So we sit in our boxes with our 1D messages and wonder why society goes elsewhere.

What we need is to recover a 3D church (SLIDE), that loves the Word, loves the Spirit, and loves the poor. A church which reads Isaiah 61 and Luke 4 as it is, which does what it says on the tin.

And that, my friends, is good news. Really good news. That's what gospel means, isn't it? Good news. Exciting year ahead for CtK – real desire to be this kind of church. Investing in Word, 100 days initiative. Reaching out with CAP course. Pushing on with Ignite on Sunday evening. Go for it – see it as just the start. This is where the dynamite is. This is the kind of church Isaiah 61 calls us to be. This is Jubilee (Leviticus 25 – no-one knows if ever practised, but Is 61 is the language of Jubilee – the great reversal, the year of God's favour.) Do we want some of this?

So it's a 3D message. Also **a message of hope**. Before look at that directly, allow me a brief diversion. What does good news for the poor really look like? Went to Coffee Hall and Fishermead for first time in last few weeks (still working way round MK): what would good news look like here?

This is another question I've been wrestling with for about 15 years, ever since I got involved in prison ministry. God is doing extraordinary things in prisons in the UK, but there's this huge question. Once a prisoner receives Christ, what happens next? What does 'release for the captives' mean? To be sure, it makes a huge difference to someone to know that they are forgiven, that God loves them, that they have access to his power in their lives. But these guys are mostly getting out to no job, no secure accommodation, to a lifelong battle with addictions.... what do we do about that? Is that our responsibility now?

What does discipleship look like for the prisoner and the ex-offender? Let me tell you about two men I met at Wandsworth Prison. First, there's Steve, a lovely guy who had a real faith and a deep desire to see his life changed, but I saw Steve back in prison twice over the course of that year. Every time he got probation his life outside was too chaotic, and he did something which put him back inside. What does good news look like for the poor? Is it enough for us to offer conversion, forgiveness, self-esteem without jobs, housing, mentoring, literacy classes, rehab?

But before this becomes another liberation theology fest, it's not that simple. Let me tell you about another friend of mine, who I'll call Simon (not his real name). I was privileged to be his sponsor at his baptism at our church. Simon was a convicted sex offender, and in many ways he was a model of the sort of 3D good news I've been talking about. He settled into our church, got married, got a job – surely this is release for the captives writ large? But you know, as his life settled down, his interest started to wane – we hardly saw him at church, and we lost touch a few

years ago. You see, it's too simplistic to say that the answer is always to meet the prisoner's practical needs and then we have the full gospel. If we want to avoid spiritualising poverty we equally want to avoid spiritualising wealth.

I think is where hope comes in. I must confess that of all the virtues, I find hope the hardest to get my head around. It seems so *intangible*. At its root, hope is the expectation that things are going to be better in the future than they are now. But so often we can't quite pin down what that looks like. But you know, it strikes me that hope is at the root of Isaiah 61. However we understand the message, at its root is the central idea that somehow through this anointed servant of the Lord things will be amazingly, unexpectedly, really better than they are now.

And I found myself thinking about this verse in Romans: (8:24) 'For in hope we were saved. Now hope that is seen is not hope.' And there I think I found the answer to what happened to Simon and Steve. Both of them found themselves, for opposite reasons, in places where they lost hope. For Steve, life on the outside offered no hope, bizarrely he only lived hopefully on the inside. For Simon, once Jesus had met all his felt needs, in a sense, he had all he hoped for. Jesus himself faded into the background.

It strikes me that at the heart of any meaningful articulation of what this good news means is that, this side of the grave, it retains a sense of hope, which is as much to say that it is yet to be fully realised, something will remain just out of reach. Now don't get me wrong, I'm not saying that the liberation Jesus speaks of doesn't happen in this life, this is not 'pie in the sky' teaching. But what I am saying is that, however much we strive to see God's kingdom come on earth as in heaven, there will always be something that requires hope, i.e. something we haven't grasped yet.

In many ways, this core teaching is the story of us all. We're all captives needing freedom in some area, we're all blind to something in our lives, we all need the Lord's favour.

Discipleship requires hope. Once we lose hope, we stop striving, and if we stop striving, in a real sense, we stop following Jesus.

In that sense, I hope, I pray, that I never stop wrestling with this passage, like my children in the 3D cinema, I hope I never stop reaching out trying to grab hold of it – for myself, and for others.

But before I close, one last brief reflection. It takes us into the gospels, to Luke 4, where Jesus quotes this passage directly. And here we have to recognise there's something very important going on. What happens when the Spirit comes on someone in the OT – like Saul, or Gideon or David? Well, revolution starts at home.

So after the Spirit came on Saul at home, he cuts a bull into pieces and declares that the same will happen to anyone who doesn't follow him, and they all go off to rout the Ammonites and get back in time for tea and medals. (That's the Boy's Own version.) Likewise, the Spirit comes upon Gideon at home, and he is transformed into the leader of his people. And most significantly of all, David is anointed by Samuel at home, and the next we hear he is off to slay Goliath – and the rest, as they say, is history.

So here is Jesus in Luke 4, he's been filled by the Spirit at his baptism – in fact he gets sent by the Spirit into the desert (v1) and then returns, still in the power of the Spirit at the start of this passage (v14). If he's to fulfil all the OT promises, where's he going to go? He's got to go home, hasn't he? Start the revolution. Go and defeat some oppressor, just like Spirit-filled leaders should.

And it starts well – here he is, in his hometown, reading Isaiah 61. Revolution is starting! The Messiah is here! But what happens next is totally unexpected. Jesus subverts the traditional understanding in two very important ways. First, if he was like the OT heroes, the next thing that would happen is an act of victorious violence: that's what happens with Saul, and Gideon, and David, where he's anointed in 1 Samuel 16 and then defeats Goliath in ch17. But not here. 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' In other words, it's not about an army, violent revolution, overthrow of the Romans. It's about me. I am the liberator, setting people free. The blind see, the lame walk, the dead are raised and good news is preached to the poor.

The revolution has come, but not as you expect. And that, of course, eventually contributed to his execution 3 years later.

But secondly, and here's where I want to close: this **message is for everyone**. Isaiah 61 is the year of Jubilee, the year of God's favour. But who is it for? Not just for the Jews, that's the answer. When Jesus speaks in Nazareth, he goes on to talk about how God blessed the widow in Sidon, a town in hated Philistine territory. How he healed Naaman, a Syrian soldier. This is for everyone!

And it's there is Isaiah 61, but they'd missed it: READ v11. But we gather here today as the beneficiaries of that message. When the Wise Men entered the stable, they testified to a Messiah for the whole world. And we worship that king. Praise God for his favour to everyone!

So as I close a question for you: **what is your good news?** And may the words of Isaiah 61 nourish us all again today. Amen.