



Sermon by Diana Johnson

Psalm 103; Isa. 61: 1-6 (actually 1-8); Col. 4.7-end

St Mary and St Michael, Trumpington

18th October 2020

Evening Prayer (no music because of Covid-19)

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of all our hearts be acceptable to you, O

Lord, our rock and our Redeemer. (Ps 19.14 alt.)

This evening I want to start by sharing a short paragraph I read yesterday in that narrowly niche publication, the Church Times. Yes, I am sad enough to have a subscription. It was an article on the parables, which is not our topic this evening. Yet one extract caught my eye. Here is what it said: *'TO START a revolution, it helps to have a good story. Jesus has multiple good stories. To define the revolution, it helps to determine the target. Jesus was not unaware of politics and economics, of non-violent revolution, and a concern for forgiving debts. But he was also interested in preparing his followers to live as if they already had one foot in the Kingdom of heaven.'*

As you will see, revolution is at the heart of the passages from Isaiah that I want to focus on today.

First though let me say that our New Testament reading, reminds us that this is the feast of St Luke: in verse 14 he is referred to by Paul as 'Luke, the beloved physician' – and I will therefore finish by returning to the New Testament, when we've considered the Isaiah reading. For we are Christian and I make no apology for reading the Old Testament through the eyes of the New. Through St Luke's eyes, indeed.

So, Old Testament first. The scene read out from Isaiah presents three speakers who figure in Jerusalem's renaissance. The first is a preacher, a healer, a messenger – that's verses 1-3. His message is not for the powerful or the rich, but for the poor, the imprisoned, the broken, and the mourners. He does not come as a strong leader to do something, put as an anointed messenger announcing meaningful things. No. His message is of freedom, of comfort, and of support. The effect of his words turns all negative conditions into beautiful positive things. The new city requires more than stones and mortar. It needs a new spirit and a new attitude to be truly beautiful. This speaker accomplishes these with his blessed words.

A second speaker is a ruler, an administrator – that's verses 4–7. He arranges for construction, for herding, for tilling fields and vineyards, for shares of land, and for Temple revenues. He grants priestly titles, privileges, and assignments to administer the affairs of the temple.



A third speaker is central to the scene. God identifies himself in verse 8a. He affirms his own dedication to justice and his antipathy to robbery and injustice. He takes credit for recompense for the priests, but will insist beyond that on his determination to establish an age-long covenant with all his people. His blessing is not for Jerusalem alone. God's purpose encompasses all Jews with the city and its priests and reaches to others beyond that.

The reading contains a balanced picture of ministries for God's peoples. The spirit-anointed preacher of good news to the disadvantaged and oppressed is vital. He is God's direct line of communication to the outsiders, the needy, and distressed. Jesus identified himself directly with this role and this passage, as in a moment we shall see in St Luke's account (Luke 4:14— 21).

Yet in any church there is a second essential role, which is one who can build, finance, and administer the Temple city. He can bring peace and safety for travellers. He can regulate and compensate Temple priests and staff. Solomon did it first. Jehoshaphat, Hezekiah, and Josiah are cited for their later service. Three Persian emperors are credited in Ezra for such service. Herod the Great built the Temple in which Jesus taught.

But it is God himself who works in and through both of these, which is why we read on to verse 8, even though our pew sheets had us finish earlier. Only as his will, his standards, and his blessing move through these human beings - the preacher and the administrator - do they have divine sanction and power. Only then do they produce joy, beauty, blessing, and peace for all who worship there. And surely that is our aim in Trumpington: joy, beauty, blessing, and peace for all who worship here.

Great as all of that is, I cannot leave it there. Please bear with me as I take it one step on; for Jesus used this passage when he read the lesson in the synagogue in his home town at the very start of his own ministry - and no respectable Christian preacher could ignore that. So I'll be respectable.

The phrase "good news to the poor" neatly summarizes St Luke's emphasis in his accounts of Jesus's concern for the marginalised and oppressed. In choosing Isaiah 61 as the text for his opening revolutionary manifesto, Jesus places himself firmly on the side of the underdog, the outsider, the outcast. The words of the prophecy could be understood either in a sense of socio-political liberation or in a sense of spiritual deliverance. (Interestingly, when I read deeper, I saw that the repeated term for "setting free" [aphesis] in 4:18 is the same word that means "forgiveness" elsewhere [in 1:77; 3:3; 24:47].)

The best guide to how Luke understood the words of the prophecy that Jesus read in the synagogue all those years ago is his following record of Jesus's actual ministry, his Gospel, where the focus falls on physical and spiritual deliverance of the sick and possessed, and on giving hope to the hopeless and a voice to the voiceless, rather than on a concrete attempt to reform the social or political system. Yet the values here expressed **have also** provided an important incentive to radical Christian socio-political involvement in subsequent generations, and I do not speak against that. Yet in our time, in this Covid emergency, I think we need to focus on what we can do here, now, ourselves.



This passage from Isaiah, I think we have seen, could be read - as I certainly read it this evening - as a manifesto for revolution. Jesus' manifesto. Using Isaiah's words, he set out his stall. His focus, at the time then, was on physical and spiritual deliverance of the sick and possessed, and on giving hope to the hopeless and a voice to the voiceless, rather than on a concrete attempt to reform the social or political system of the time. In our own Covid time, of course we can have a socio-political opinion: on the structure of government; on the rules and regulations; on the performance of our politicians. Yet we must not do this at the expense of our neighbours, our families and our friends. So I applaud those of you who are focusing on **looking after people** (repeat who are focusing on **looking after people**).

For it's what Jesus would have done.

Amen.

Word count: 1128 Time: 9 mins

Approx. 125 words min⁻¹

Acknowledgements to John Watts and RT France for their commentaries.



The Good News of Deliverance

61 The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
² to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,
and the day of vengeance of our God;
to comfort all who mourn;
³ to provide for those who mourn in Zion—
to give them a garland instead of ashes,
the oil of gladness instead of mourning,
the mantle of praise instead of a faint spirit.
They will be called oaks of righteousness,
the planting of the Lord, to display his glory.
⁴ They shall build up the ancient ruins,
they shall raise up the former devastations;
they shall repair the ruined cities,
the devastations of many generations.
⁵ Strangers shall stand and feed your flocks,
foreigners shall till your land and dress your vines;
⁶ but you shall be called priests of the Lord,
you shall be named ministers of our God;
you shall enjoy the wealth of the nations,
and in their riches you shall glory.
⁷ Because their^[a] shame was double,
and dishonour was proclaimed as their lot,
therefore they shall possess a double portion;
everlasting joy shall be theirs.
⁸ For I the Lord love justice,
I hate robbery and wrongdoing;^[b]
I will faithfully give them their recompense,
and I will make an everlasting covenant with them.

Footnotes

- a. [Isaiah 61:7](#) Heb *your*
- b. [Isaiah 61:8](#) Or *robbery with a burnt-offering*

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