

Good news for the poor – Isaiah 61: 1-3

Intro

Just over 5 years ago I was privileged to spend a few weeks in Cape Town, with others from St Swithins, visiting our Mission partner The Warehouse.

Whilst we were there, we spent time at an informal settlement on the Cape Flats called Sweet Home Farm. It really couldn't be called Sweet, neither was it a Farm, but the people who lived there had made it their home. The Warehouse team were involved in several projects running in the township and introduced us to local community leaders and families. The residents of Sweet Home Farm faced so many disadvantages; a lack of basic infrastructure; terrible issues of violence and insecurity, and the ever-present danger of fire and flood that could, and did, destroy their homes. What they longed for most of all was for their voice to be heard. For others to listen to the injustice they faced and to stand alongside them and speak up for them. To give them hope that things could change.

As we look at these few verses in Isaiah 61 this morning, I'm going to reflect on what the message of good news for the poor tells us about God's character; how it is central to Jesus' ministry and mission, and how we are called to bring Good News to the poor today.

God's character

Let us start with looking at the wider context of this Isaiah passage and what it tells us about the character of God. Isaiah's prophecies were given to the nation of Israel some 700 years before Jesus' birth. The people of Israel had rebelled against their covenant with God, demonstrated in their idolatry, and oppression of the poor, the weak and vulnerable. Speaking on God's behalf Isaiah has a message of coming judgement. Israel's failure to follow God's rule has consequences. In Chapter 1 Isaiah calls out how Israel's worship is unacceptable because they are not acting with justice and righteousness to the most vulnerable.

When you spread out your hands in prayer,

I hide my eyes from you;

even when you offer many prayers,

I am not listening.

Your hands are full of blood!

Wash and make yourselves clean.

Take your evil deeds out of my sight;

stop doing wrong.

Learn to do right; seek justice.

Defend the oppressed.

Take up the cause of the fatherless;

plead the case of the widow.

Why does it matter to God so much that Israel are not acting with justice and defending the oppressed? When we look at the Old Testament we can see that Justice (Hebrew mishpat) and righteousness (Hebrew word tsedeka) are key themes and central to the character of God. The Hebrew biblical scholar Abraham Heschel points out that “Yahweh’s justice and righteousness is not an added attribute to his essence but is inherit to his being and identified with all his ways”. In Deuteronomy 32 we read:

He is the Rock, his works are perfect,

and all his ways are just.

A faithful God who does no wrong,

upright and just is he.

Psalm 11:7

For the Lord is righteous,

he loves justice;

the upright will see his face.

At the very beginning of the bible story God specifically called Abraham to teach his family to do righteousness and justice. God's people, Israel, are called to follow his way of justice and righteousness and make this the rule of their lives. This biblical concept of justice is something beyond the strict legal sense we have. It is more like the idea of restorative justice, an active seeking out of the vulnerable and taking steps to advocate for them. In his compassion, and longing for justice and righteousness, God heard the cry of vulnerable and oppressed Israel in Egypt, he redeemed them from slavery and set them free. The tragic irony is that God's freed people have forgotten what he has done for them. Far from being at the centre of creating the same kind of mishpat for others, especially the vulnerable, the oppressed have gone on to become oppressors themselves.

However, Isaiah also brings a message of hope. Through Isaiah, God declares Good News. God's covenant promises will be fulfilled. A new king is coming, a king from David's line, a new model of a servant king, a spirit-led and anointed king. God's kingdom is coming and this is a message of hope for the poor, the marginalised and outcast everywhere.

Jesus ministry

So, lets fast forward 700 years to the gospel of Luke. Jesus returns to Galilee, following his baptism with the Holy Spirit in the River Jordan, and is "teaching in their synagogues". In chapter 4 Luke records that Jesus went to the synagogue in Nazareth on the Sabbath Day and he starts his public ministry by reading from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah:

"The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor."

Astonishingly Jesus announces that “today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing”. The promised spirit-led anointed one shown to Isaiah is speaking. Jesus uses Isaiah’s words to explain the nature of God’s coming kingdom. He has come to release the oppressed, free the prisoner, open the eyes of the blind and bring Good News to the poor. Jesus embodies God’s mishpat for the poor.

Who are these poor? The Hebrew word used here is a much wider category than simply the economically disadvantaged. It encompasses people of low social status, women, children, elderly, frail and disabled and also outsiders whose ethnic origin or life choices put them outside acceptable society.

In Luke chapters 4 to 8 we see Jesus living out what good news for the poor looks like. He heals the sick and welcomes social outsiders, tax collectors, prostitutes, and other social outcasts. Jesus expands God’s kingdom to welcome all. However, Jesus has a warning for the self-righteous who consider their place in God’s kingdom comes from power, status, wealth, or acceptable religious practice. God’s rule, established by Jesus’ ministry, turns the world’s rule upside down... the first will be last, those who thirst and hunger for righteousness will be satisfied, the meek will inherit the earth. God’s grace and mercy is coming first to those who seem to be farthest from his kingdom.

Jesus embodied justice and righteousness in his ministry on earth but his rule was nothing like an earthly king. He suffered a humiliating death on a cross. Yet, the cross is precisely the point where God’s justice and righteousness meet. In Jesus death, God provides just recompense for human evil, and embodies mishpat for the poor by taking the justice on himself. As followers of Jesus, we have received God’s mishpat. God has seen our plight as poor, frail, corrupt humans, and we can be declared righteous because of the death and resurrection of Jesus.

The earliest followers of Jesus responded to this undeserved good news of righteousness by living radical new lives. Empowered by the Holy Spirit they demonstrated the reality of God’s kingdom, welcoming the poor, the outcast, and the marginalised and sharing the Good News.

Our response

The followers of Jesus should be at the forefront of sharing the Good News for the poor and reflecting God's justice and righteousness for the outsider and the oppressed. Our challenge is to take seriously all that God has done for us in our poverty through the death and resurrection of Jesus and to respond by seeking that justice and righteousness for others.

When Jesus stood up in the synagogue and announced that he was the fulfilment of the prophecy of Good News for the poor, he was filled with the Holy Spirit. Similarly, the early Church were able to live radical lives based on Jesus' kingdom values because they had been empowered by the Holy Spirit. We are not left on our own to try and reflect God's heart for the outsider, the poor and the oppressed. We have been given the Holy Spirit to encourage, equip, and enable us to live lives that truly bring Good News to the poor.

We can ask the Holy Spirit to open our eyes and ears to hear the voice of the outsider, the oppressed, the poor, the vulnerable. We can listen to their voices in our neighbourhood, our city and ask God how can we join in to bring his Good News.

We can ask the Holy Spirit to soften our hearts. In the words of the Hillsong worship song, we can ask God to *break our hearts for what breaks yours*. So that through the work of the Holy Spirit we can see those around us with God's heart, poor, frail, mortal, vulnerable humans who all so long to hear Good News.