

SERVICE TRANSCRIPT

21st June 2020

Isaiah 61:1-3

61 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.

He has sent me to bind up the broken hearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners,^[a]

² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour
and the day of vengeance of our God,
to comfort all who mourn,

³ and provide for those who grieve in Zion—
to bestow on them a crown of beauty
instead of ashes,
the oil of joy
instead of mourning,
and a garment of praise
instead of a spirit of despair.

They will be called oaks of righteousness,
a planting of the LORD
for the display of his splendour.

CALL TO WORSHIP

Praise the Lord, you who worship the Lord; stand in awe of God, and give glory to the Lord.
For the Lord does not despise the poor and needy, but when they cry out, God answers them.
The hungry shall eat and be satisfied, and those who love the Lord shall offer praise.
All the ends of the earth shall worship God, for the Lord rules over every nation.

Lord Jesus, Holy and Anointed One, we come before you this morning, we come to You because you have rescued us and made us part of your body. We come to proclaim how much we love You. As we look at Your word this morning, may we understand a little more what you came to do and how we continue your mission by the power of Your Spirit.
We ask this in Your name. Amen.

SERMON

The word of God was sweet to my taste, yea sweeter than honey and the honeycomb. Christ was revealed to my soul as the chiefest among ten thousand," Gustavo Vassa/ Olaudah Equiano.

Those were the words of an 18th century African Christian convert and seafarer, who was known as Gustavo Vassa but whose birth name was Olaudah Equiano, born in Eboe region in West Africa (now in Nigeria) around 1745. He was kidnapped from his village at the age of eleven by a neighbouring tribe and sold as a slave, firstly within West Africa and then to European slave traders who

transported him to Barbados and then to Virginia. He recalled how in the process of enslavement he saw many beaten, even beaten to death, thrown overboard ship, women raped and other things that adults should never witness, let alone an eleven year old boy. He was bought by a Navy captain Michael Pascal as a personal slave. Pascal liked him and on return to England saw that he received a basic education. He was baptised as a Christian aged 12 in 1759 in London and it seems he developed a genuine faith in Christ which guided him, particularly later in life. Pascal took Equiano with him on ship and the now teenager was involved in all parts of ship life, including engaging in battle.

Equiano was hoping to buy his freedom from Pascal, but being literate and numerate increased his value as a slave. Instead Equiano was sold to another captain called James Doran, who took him to Montserrat where he sold him on to a trader called Robert King from Virginia, who was a Quaker. King furthered his education, but as was the case, he had to work to buy his freedom which he achieved in 1766 for the sum of £40, the equivalent of £5,500 today. As a freedman he returned to London almost straight away as he was afraid that in Virginia that he would be captured again and enslaved. Between then and his death in 1797 he became a prominent campaigner for the abolition of the slave trade and slavery generally. That would not come for another three decades in Britain.

The legacy and injustice of the Atlantic slave trade still is very much with us. We have been reminded recently of the brutal legacy of the slave trade which leads to deep injustice in many parts of the United States and there is still a legacy of prejudice and injustice here in the UK. We have been reminded afresh this past couple of weeks that many cities in Britain, particularly Bristol, became rich on the evil of the slave trade. Slavery wasn't the only injustice that Britain inflicted on the peoples of its Empire including its own citizens, in the pursuit of wealth and industrialisation but by far it ranks as the worst. Before you think that Christians like William Wilberforce or Olaudah Equiano were representative of the Christian response to slavery, they weren't. It was common for clergy, particularly in the West Indies and American Colonies to have house slaves. They saw nothing wrong in it. Baptists were complicit, too, but like other denominations, there were also prominent Baptist campaigners for abolition, particularly William Knibb, one of the early pioneers of the BMS.

Sadly slavery is still alive and well and exists in many parts of the world, including here in the UK. It may be illegal everywhere, but it still goes on in the following ways:

Domestic Servitude.

Sex Trafficking.

Forced Labour.

Bonded Labour.

Child Labour.

Forced Marriage

I think we can recognise what all of these are and they are all slavery because they all involved someone having to work very hard without proper remuneration or appreciation – with some form of coercion involved and the enslaved doesn't have the ability to be able to walk away from their coercive situation. Dehumanisation is frequently involved. In most countries today, coercion is illegal. As we know, that hasn't always been the case. Systematic coercion and slavery has also been part of aggressive regimes since time immemorial and even in living memory it was systematically practised in Nazi Germany and Cambodia for example, genocide also being associated.

And what's the Biblical perspective - God's perspective - on this? Each human being is created by Him and created equal before Him. Human beings invariably place a value on one another. It's part of our society. It's how position, rank, or pay grades work. We judge character by how someone speaks and acts or where they live or work. Within that someone's worth may be judged unjustly on the basis of such things as skin colour, race, culture, religion, class, gender, language, disability, prejudice.

What does God see when He looks at us? How does He judge? I'll give you two verses. First there's Romans 3:23 NIV *"for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God."* We have the same value in God's economy. We're unfit to be in His presence. That applies to everyone who enters this world. The next verse is good news though. John 3:16: *"For God so loved the world, that he gave his only Son, that whoever believes in him should not perish but have eternal life."* The price that Equiano paid for his freedom was £50, but the price Jesus paid for our freedom was His shed blood.

As far as the church of God is concerned, we are people of equal status. A few weeks ago – or was that months now? – we had this verse from Colossians 3:11 *"Here there is not Greek and Jew, circumcised and uncircumcised, barbarian, Scythian, slave, free; but Christ is all, and in all."* That's God's view, His situation. What as His church should we do about modern slavery and the legacy of our country's past that's still with us? That takes us to Isaiah 61:1-3 again. I bet you were wondering when I'd get around to it.

The standards of God's kingdom were established hundreds of years before Jesus as the prophecy of Isaiah looked forward to the Messiah. We have in Isaiah a familiar scenario: an aggressive invader who had no respect for life or human dignity. Both Assyria and Babylon destroyed lands and cultures. When they had conquered, they slaughtered many, they enslaved all the fit and useful people, and took them captive elsewhere, along with their wealth. They particularly took the young and intelligent and moulded them into faithful citizens of Babylon or whatever – our first song referred to Daniel, Shadrach, Meshach and Abednego who were persecuted for not conforming to the conditioning of their masters. Those resisting were killed or imprisoned. The people left in the land, the old and the weak were left to eke out a living in the ruins. It was a time of great mourning and sadness. Psalm 137 famously describes the mourning of the people: *By the rivers of Babylon we sat and wept when we remembered Zion. There on the poplars we hung our harps, for there our captors asked us for songs, our tormentors demanded songs of joy; they said, "Sing us one of the songs of Zion!" How can we sing the songs of the Lord while in a foreign land?* Psalm 137:1-4 NIV. Give it a read – they were a broken people; heartbroken, captives; angry even.

These empires broke nations completely because that reduced the possibility of insurrection later: Israel was wiped from existence by the Assyrians in 722BC, but by God's grace Judah was reborn 80 years or so after its conquest of 586BC by Nebuchadnezzar.

All of this is covered by Isaiah's prophecy which is quite an enigmatic book. Isaiah himself lived in 8th century BC at a time when Assyria destroyed Israel and threatened Judah and Jerusalem. The traditional view was that the whole prophecy was written at that time. Certainly chapters 1-39 predict the forthcoming destruction of the land and exile that finally occurred in 586BC. However, chapters 40-66 have a different style and message, suggesting that they were written during the latter days of the Exile in Babylon and encouraged the Jews to look forward to deliverance from Exile. The writer is sometimes referred to as Deutero-Isaiah. It has also been suggested that

chapters 56-66 may have been written by a third writer as the theme is much more geared to the Jews being a light to the nations.

In these latter chapters God was addressing a nation which had been broken but He was going to bring an end to it. There are many deeper spiritual meanings in Isaiah 61:1-3. I'll deal with that next week.

For the original readers of Isaiah 40-66, God is One who comes to a broken people to bring hope, to bring comfort, to bring freedom, to bring healing, and that's not in some esoteric manner. That's literally. That was a reality that was fulfilled in their day. The enslaved captives were free to return to their land, prisoners were released. The return was good news for the poor and the process of healing could start after the trauma of exile.

But in Isaiah generally and in 40-66 particularly there is a strong second narrative. Out of all this, God was going to raise up a great leader – The Servant – and that Servant was to pay a huge price to release His people from their sins and iniquities e.g. in chapter 53. In chapter 61 we see this person as the Anointed One, the Messiah, who was going to deal with all the hurt brought about by the poverty, slavery, captivity and sadness, and change as it says in verse 3 to bestow on them a crown of beauty instead of ashes, the oil of joy instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

One thing that was clear, that although the Jews were free to return to Judah, they were now only a province of bigger Empires – over time these were Persian, Medo-Persian, Greek, Herodian, Roman or whatever. In fact Jews were even more spread over the world after the end of the Exile because of conflicts with their new imperial masters. It wasn't the end of injustice, sorrow and repression for their society. Whereas there was rarely the brutality of the Babylonian exile, the Jews waited for the Messiah who would restore the kingdom to Israel and usher in a society that was just and godly. They're still waiting. What they had in mind and what God had purposed were two different things.

And of course, we know that coming Messiah to be Jesus. He was ushering in, not the kingdom that the Jews expected, but a kingdom made up of a redeemed people, those who had trusted and followed Jesus. He was the Suffering Servant of Isaiah 53. His kingdom does not have the values of the earthly kingdoms, quite the reverse *The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me, because the Lord has anointed me to proclaim good news to the poor. He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners* etc. He does the reverse to what human "civilization" has through countless millennia has done to people.

Last week we found that God has a bias to the poor – He is a God who loves those who find themselves disadvantaged by the selfishness of others, next week we'll find He's a God who heals broken people. He's also the God who proclaims freedom for the captives. As I've said previously, He's a God who brings justice for the victims of injustice and today we see the Messiah proclaiming freedom for captives – by that is meant those enslaved into something they can't get out of. We can look at it in a spiritual way as we'll do in a later week, but the original meaning was literal as we have seen and as we do Kingdom work, we still encounter those who are captives, enslaved and we are part of a society where we can and should do something about it so they will achieve freedom. If we want men and women to receive the ultimate freedom of knowing Jesus, then we need to be the voice of Jesus in bringing actual freedom in our society.

How can we do that? One way is by keeping ourselves informed and involved by organisations which work in this area. One ministry we have encountered before is the International Justice Ministry. Here's some info from them.

The other way we can bring freedom is by ensuring that the legacy of the past doesn't disadvantage people. It's shocking how the legacy of the past can hang over centuries after the grave offence. We see that in America now with attitudes and divisions belonging not just to last century but the one before! It happens here too, and if we examine ourselves, we'll find that it may well be in our past and even our present too – words that offend, attitudes not worthy of Christ, prejudices inherited over years, fears that have no rational root. I am old enough to think back 50 years and realise just how racist our society was when I was young and how people regarded certain words and attitudes as acceptable which were actually not only offensive to black, Asian or other minorities but prevented many from accessing the freedoms which the white population enjoyed. Some of that may have changed, but the reality is that much still hasn't.

We need to examine ourselves. Our purpose as the church of God is to be redemptive and part of that is to proclaim freedom for the captives. It's our calling and witness. Let's do that as God leads us and the Holy Spirit empowers us.

CONFESSION

Let's pray.

Father as we come before You, we recognise that we are a country that has a history of enslaving and exploiting people. Although this is something that we would never condone ourselves, we recognise that there is a legacy of racism and prejudice in our own country against black and other minority communities. Show us where we have attitudes towards others that are wrong and do not reflect Your word and Your love. Help us to be salt and light in our community; a people who speak of true freedom of all, not afraid to call out injustice and perpetuate white privilege.

We pray to for the ongoing issues in the USA as well as here in Britain and on the continent resulting from the renewed consciousness of racism in our societies. We pray for wisdom for the Government that they will deal with the situation with justice and equity. May your Church continue to be united against racism in all forms, determined to see an end of slavery in this world and promote in word and deed that true freedom is found only in Christ.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

PRAYERS

As we continue in prayer, let's bring before God the ongoing pandemic situation.

Lord as we continue to look with concern at the global pandemic, we lift it before you and say, Lord have mercy. As the death count has now reached over 45,000 in our land and over 400,000 worldwide, we know that this has brought much sorrow to many families from the loss of loved ones – Father may you bring comfort in those situations and may you open the hearts and minds of your people, the church, to bind up the broken-hearted. May you too equip and encourage your church to be the hands and feet of Jesus to people in crisis: those who have lost their jobs, to those who need food, to those who need a friendly face and voice in isolation.

We ask this in Jesus' name. Amen.

We are going to take a few moments to bring our own personal prayers before God as we remember our families, our church and our community before Him.

(Silent Prayer)

Father, thank you that in the name of Jesus and by the power of Your Holy Spirit, you are able to transform lives, bring hope and bring true freedom to each person. May that be true in the life of everyone we have prayed for today, and may you build up Your church at Maidstone Road to continue to be Good News in our community.

We ask this in Jesus' name.

Amen

CLOSING WORDS

Before we go, there are a couple of notices we need to bring to your attention. We may soon be coming to the point where we will be allowed back into the church building in order to meet. There will surely be many regulations relating to numbers, distancing, cleaning and other things that we will need to abide by to make it "Covid safe". In the last few months, church has been very different from what we have been used to. What should the church be like after lockdown? We're sending out a questionnaire to help us think about what the church will be in the coming months. The Leaders will then look at the replies and we can discuss them at the July church meeting to help us think through how we restart church life in Maidstone Road. If you don't have a copy, there's one just down here. Please return the questionnaire by Friday 3rd July.

At the moment we only have one small group operating, which is the Worship Group on a Monday, the rest being suspended for the time being. If anyone is interested in joining in a Zoom based small group for chat, prayer and Bible study, please get in touch with me. It will be an interim group until our face to face groups are up and running.

That's it for today. Be blessed and stay safe.

For Reflection & Discussion

1. Take a look at the following verses: Psalm 9:9, Psalm 82:3, Proverbs 31:8-9, Job 5:15-16, Jeremiah 22:3. How do verses like these help us to understand God's attitude towards the weak and oppressed?
2. What arguments do you think Christians in the 18th and 19th centuries used to justify their support or at least their condoning of black slavery and the slave trade? Why do you think seemingly good people stand by and tolerate injustice in their land or abroad?
3. Take a look at Numbers 14:17-18. There is a train of thought that suggests that we often have to live with the consequences of past sin through subsequent generations. In what respect are some countries and peoples reflecting past sins in relation to slavery? Can Christians bring healing into this situation?
4. Take time to reflect on how your thinking towards racial issues may be affected by your past and what you pick up from the world. How does that differ from what Paul says in Colossians 3:11?
5. You may find you need to do a little research online to explore some of these issues. Take time to pray through them afterwards.