

The Time of God's Favour

20 09 09

Isaiah ch61 v1-4

A young woman, not far beyond her teens, has married the leader of the superpower of her day. He had other wives and women's rights were not as they are now. All who would approach the Leader had to be summoned they dare not initiate an approach on the pain of death.

Yet the call of God on this young woman's life, the plight of her ethnic group and her conscience compel her to approach the leader. So the time comes for her to draw near and the issue comes down to this - will he extend his favour? Will she be welcomed or condemned? Will she live or die?

The woman (as some may have guessed) was Esther the leader of the superpower was Xerxes King of the Medes & Persians... and he did extend his favour, he held out the golden scepter she touched its tip and was secure.

Why am I telling you this? Because many people have a question deep in their hearts when they think about God; a question that is deeply embedded. "Can man or woman approach God and live?" "When I die and find myself before the Presence of God, what will happen to me?"

If you find that question within yourself it is vital to know the good news that Jesus had to tell, and to experience on earth now what he called the time "of the LORD's favour."

So let us look together at this passage from Isaiah ch61. When these words were first spoken, they were most likely words to encourage Jewish exiles longing for return and restoration and who in 538 BC began to be allowed by Cyrus King of Persia to rebuild Jerusalem.

But we find these words given a whole new life and power when they are taken on the lips of Jesus Christ himself at the start of his public ministry.

Jesus had received a baptism from his cousin John the Baptist and then was led by the Holy Spirit into the desert where he had to face and overcome the tests of the devil. Having won that defining victory Dr Luke tells us, He "returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit... He taught in their synagogues, and everyone praised Him."

Then "He went to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was His custom. And He stood up to read. The scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to Him. Unrolling it, He found the place where it is written: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me...' and the rest as they say is history.

In these words we see Jesus' manifesto laid out, we see the heart of God for this world displayed and we see the mission of the Church set down (a mission by the way that has not been taken away).

Let's look at the precise words Jesus quoted first from verse 1 to the start of verse 2:

¹ The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me,
because the LORD has anointed me
to preach good news to the poor.
He has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted,
to proclaim freedom for the captives
and release from darkness for the prisoners (or blind),
² to proclaim the year of the LORD's favour

It was clear to all that Jesus was anointed, or marked out, by the Holy Spirit. They were amazed at His authority in speaking and by His actions. His message, the gospel or good news, is exactly what it says on the tin - good news. News as Mark was reminding us last week of the unconditional love of God, news of the loving Father, news of forgiveness, news of welcome, news of Heaven come down to earth bringing peace and reconciliation... good news.

His message (as described by Matthew) was this "Turn around/change direction, because you can put out your hand and take hold of the Kingdom of Heaven." Fine words, and words backed up by the most wonderful healings of all who were brought to Him - whatever their need. It's what you might expect when heaven invades earth... it was certainly popular. But not everyone liked Jesus.

The very religious people the Pharisees did not like Him, nor did the very political people, the Herodians, followers of Rome's corrupt puppet King Herod. If we see what happens in the reading beyond where Jesus stopped we get an interesting perspective because Isaiah goes on to speak of the "day of vengeance of our God."

Alec Motyer writes of Jesus: "He expressed his own understanding of his mission at that point... to save the world. He was also aware... of a coming day when he would execute the judgment committed to him."

As we say in our creeds/statements of faith: he is seated at the right hand of the Father, and he will come to judge the living and the dead.

Not everyone liked Jesus, it is the same today, but those who took His message to heart found it very good news indeed.

The brokenhearted were comforted, the captives of sickness and prisoners of ill health, as well as those oppressed by evil, found freedom and liberty at His word and touch. Because of Jesus they learnt that God loved them and cared for them.

I wonder today if you know, because of Jesus, that God loves you and cares for you? I say "because of Jesus" because the Church has made and still does make many mistakes.

Christians are not perfect, Vicars are not perfect... only Jesus was "like us in every way, yet without sin." That is not to let Christians off lightly, the one thing we should be able to say is that we are being changed and the one thing that others should be able to see is steady change... but the only One who will never let you down is Jesus.

I have found Christians very off putting at times, I expect that at times, I have put others off, but I have never found Jesus off putting, and because of Him I know God loves me.

Let me show you some of the things that God wants to give those who will come to Him... **comfort** for **all who mourn**, provision **for those who grieve in Zion** and specifically:

A crown of beauty instead of ashes,

The oil of gladness instead of mourning,

a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair.

The Hebrew for crown or head dress uses the same letters as the Hebrew for ashes, but rearranged. So God longs to rearrange human lives where there is grieving and mourning over loss and mistakes, over wrongs that have been done and injuries sustained... and in place of the ashes of mourning that would have been placed on the head He promises to crown those lives with beauty. **A crown of beauty instead of ashes.**

At special moments of life and in festivals and celebrations in ancient Israel oil was poured over the head as a sign of blessing and joy - and so here God's promise is for gladness to replace the grieving, the mourning. **The oil of gladness instead of mourning**

Finally, an all covering cloak or wrap is given - the garment of praise that we experience in worship and that helps us worship, love, joy, hope and peace given to us in exchange for spiritual despair. **A garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair**

Jesus offered then and still offers now, an exchange.

The year of the Lord's favour has not ended yet... God is in a good mood... we can still exchange.

(Three things here & three things there...)

For those who will give up the ashes, the grieving and the spirit of despair there is a crown of beauty, there is the oil of gladness, there is the garment of praise.

It is not that hard a call. It is not that difficult a choice really... but it is for us to respond to Jesus and if we want to experience God's favour to lay down the bad stuff and say, "Oh yes please Holy Spirit - bring that other good stuff to my life today?"

(St A's ministry)

What you then find is that there is a new start, a new life, a new identity as you find yourself among those called "**Oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendour.**"

It is not unusual to find a little more excitement within yourself about the person of Jesus... sometimes an enormous excitement so that even like Evan Roberts in the Welsh Revival of 1904 you feel "**ablaze with a desire to tell of the Saviour: and had it been possible to pay God for doing so.**"

There is also a task (rather more spiritual than physical) to **rebuild the ancient ruins... restore the places long devastated... renew the ruined cities.**

In this nation there is much that has been lost and devastated... many lives that are adrift as a consequence. How tragic it is when people are ignorant of the love of God. How sad when lives are lived with no regard for His loving purposes and plans.

Our faith is not merely a matter of preference, a personal and private affair, it affects how we see the world and how we are meant to live with each other in it. It is about an eternity in Heaven but also about seeing Heaven breaking through on earth in the here and now.

Esther needed real courage to approach King Xerxes, she took a risk for a great cause and was not disappointed. We will need courage to stand up and speak out in a nation that is rapidly moving away from its Christian heritage, but we need not fear as we approach King Jesus, and we will most certainly not be disappointed by Him - the time of God's favour is still NOW.