

ISAIAH 61:1-4  
TRANSFORMATION!

The first sermon I ever preached was in 1977. It was in a church in Crieff that is now closed; I don't think there is a connection! I was part of a student mission team in the town and I was asked to preach on each of the three Sundays we were there and for the first the Bible passage I was given was the story of Zaccheus, "the mission of Jesus"; from then on, Zaccheus has had a place in my heart; *"the son of man came to seek and to save what was lost."* I still have a rough copy of the text and I read it on Friday when I preparing this; it was not too bad; I thought it would be worse than it is! But I can guarantee you one thing: the presentation of it was awful; the sermon was delivered in a flat monotone of a voice that would have sent most people to sleep. Hopefully it is different now! A couple of years later, I was preaching again and this time the minister recorded the service and listened to the tape, then gave me the tape to listen to myself; I lasted about 2 minutes before deciding that I needed to do some work on my presentation skills!

I tell you all of this, not because I think you'll find it riveting, but because of Jesus' first sermon. Jesus' first sermon, according to Luke, took place in the synagogue in Nazareth. Here was the local boy made good; He is home for the weekend, and is invited to preach in His local synagogue. The passage He read, either because it was the passage given for that day, or because He chose it, was Isaiah 61, the piece we read a few moments ago. He read the Bible and then sat down and the sermon that is recorded begins: *"Today..." (Luke 4:21)* He went on to say more, and it did not end particularly well; they wanted to throw Him off the local hill! The Jews who came before Jesus and the Christians who came after Him all recognised this as a promise of the Messiah and what the Messiah will do; so we read it on the third Sunday in Advent as a way of reflecting on the ministry of Jesus, what He came to do and how He went about completing the divinely-appointed work that God had given Him to do.

In Isaiah 61:1-4 how many transformation pictures can you find? I think I found eleven! It is full of transformation, full of change, all of it for the better. Isaiah writes about a people who need to change or rather, be changed! There are all sorts of situations in which they find themselves, described by lots of different pictures, that show how they need transformation, but they can't do it for themselves. God has anointed the Messiah to come to the world to change things. Look at our world and see how it needs changed: Black Friday brought out the worst in people - "I want that telly; no, its mine!" and we see a world that needs changed; we watch TV pictures of people in refugee camps in Lebanon, intelligent people, businessmen, women, children, just sitting round all day watching the world go by, wasting away because there is nothing to do and nowhere to go; there are people for whom life is simply too much and they are in a place of anger and despair, and life is bleak. Can we dare to hope that these pictures of transformation give us anything to take away? Change is scary; there is something comfortable about the ways things are, even if things are awful. We put up with so much rather than change even when change is for our good. Churches find change really hard even when we know it is necessary and for our good. Messiah comes to transform!

The people are described in all sorts of ways: they are poor, broken-hearted, captives, prisoners, those who mourn, those who grieve, whose heads are covered in ashes, those who are gripped by a spirit of despair, and the places they love are long devastated, their cities devastated for generations. You get an idea of a people for whom life is not good. There are all kinds of ways of understanding this list: for example, people are poor. That can describe people in all sorts of ways, the most obvious is the simplest: there are people in our world who don't have enough money

to survive, so they don't have enough food to eat. People in places like Sierra Leone are poor because they have not got enough food, there is no clean water, and no proper sanitation and so much of that is the result of corruption in high places. How many food banks are there in Edinburgh? 4, 5, 6? There are people who depend on food banks to tide them over to the end of week, till their next wages. The Salvation Army tell us of poor families across the city. These people are poor, and life needs some kind of transformation. There are people for whom the quality of life is poor in other ways: they are lonely, they have no good relationships, or nobody to speak to from one day to the next; some have no sense of worth or value about themselves at all, and others struggle to cope with all that life throws at them.

Here are three pictures of transformation in v.3: *"to bestow..." (Isaiah 61:3)* Let's have a closer look: "ashes" mean repentance in the Old Testament: the person who was convinced of his sin would cover himself with ashes as a sign of the low point in his life, the spirit of penitence that filled his heart, pouring them over his head to show that he was a sinner in need of repentance and forgiveness and sitting in the ash-heap. "Mourning" and "despair" take us deeper into the lowest points of the human experience of life, dark places where we go more often than we like to admit, but don't often talk about. Here's the transformation: the Messiah will take the ashes off your head, will take away the signs of sadness, repentance and grief and will replace them with a "crown of beauty": the women of Jerusalem wore turbans on their heads, headdresses that set off their beauty and made something of a display. Oil poured over their heads was a sign of the blessing of God resting on their lives. A garment of praise will replace despair. These new clothes that they are given to wear is a picture of the deep inner transformation that has taken place in their lives; beauty for ashes, gladness for mourning, praise for despair! What a set of transformations!

Beauty for ashes: a person who has a deep sense of failure, so many mistakes, the same mistake so many times, the addiction that can't be broken – is given a new sense of forgiveness, of self-worth and value that they find so exciting; life is transformed. Someone is wrestling with the hardest days of their lives, they feel forgotten, they've lost their job, someone has died, a relationship has broken down, life is at rock bottom, ashes – discovers that Jesus loves them, that other people love them and care for them too; they are loved; life is transformed. There are so many ways in which these words can touch our lives, so many examples of life at its worst and how God can transform these lives by the grace of Jesus! The sad part is that we so often don't see that grace; we get stuck in the ashes and can't see how God has saved us, rescued us, and graced us. We keep telling the stories of Jesus because these stories tell us of the transformation that Jesus brings to the world and to us. We have a better sense of ourselves, who we are: we are a people loved by God, people to whom God gives a crown of beauty, the oil of gladness, a garment of praise; this is the deep inner transformation that is worked in us by Jesus, and we are new people, loved people.

Jesus came to change the world. The Prologue to John's gospel talks about Jesus like this: *"In Him..." (John 1:4f)* *"The true..." (1:9)* The thing about light is that it transforms the darkness; the smallest candle in the darkest room will change the room; how many times do we scream at our TV screens when someone walks into the dark room and the music is menacing "Switch on the lights!" because light transforms the darkness; Jesus came to transform the darkness by being the light of the world. People didn't understand; some didn't like what He came to do; some refused to acknowledge Him; the aftermath of the sermon in the synagogue at Nazareth was scary! But Jesus came to change the world; there is a deep transforming impact that the gospel makes in the world still and so we tell the stories of Jesus again and again in the hope that lives will be changed and the world will be

changed a little bit more. The pictures of Isaiah 61 are best completed when Jesus came: we are new people in Jesus; we are transformed; open your eyes to see what Jesus has done for you and for me.

How do we transform our world? How do we get rid of the ugly greed of Black Friday? Or hatred and war? Or poverty that is a result of corruption? How can we hope? Well, we do what Jesus did; we work to transform people! That's what Jesus came to do, to change people's lives. He came to turn greed to generosity; hatred to love; corruption to honesty; selfishness to caring for others - this is the kind of transformation the gospel still makes on people's lives; ask Zaccheus! We tell the stories of Jesus and people will be changed, the world will be transformed. As people whom Jesus has already transformed we need to work and pray for a better world, to work and pray for other people's lives to be transformed; the Spirit who anointed Jesus will be at work in and through us.

*"The word..." (John 1 :14)* Jesus knows what the neighbourhood is like; He's lived in it! Jesus knows what life is like for us; He's lived it! Beauty for ashes, gladness for mourning, praise for despair - Jesus transforms us and our world. This is the hope that Advent inspires in us, that the same Jesus is at work in us and in our world today. Dare we hope that this is also true for us? *"Today..." (Luke 4:21)*