

# Sermon preached at Gisborne, 13 December 2020

Isaiah 61: 1-4, 8-11; John 1:6-8, 19-28

*Our Lord and our God, now as we hear your good news, fill us with your Spirit. Soften our hearts that we may delight in your presence. Sharpen our minds that we may discern your truth. Shape our wills that we may desire your ways. Through Jesus Christ, our Lord. Amen.*

## Good news to all!

Under the title of 'High Anxiety,' the weekly magazine *Listener* reports that about a third of New Zealanders experienced psychological distress in lock-down, well above the levels measured in previous population surveys. In this featured article, the foci were how to deal with distress and anxieties through remedies from micro-dosing psychedelics to getting active.<sup>1</sup> When it comes to health issues, spiritual wellbeing is rarely considered as part of treatments. Presumably, it may be beyond the public health system. From biblical perspectives, spiritual health cannot be separable from physical health because they are the same one body. There is no concept of divisions of body, soul and spirit in Hebrew scripture. As such, delivering the good news to all in the world is critical as much as educating how to wash hands and cough in public. It is because we believe that the good news of Jesus Christ has the real power of healing and making people live well. With this in mind, we'll talk about the good news, the messenger(s) of good news, and our Christian life as the good news to the suffering world as a whole.

### 1. The Good news

In Isaiah 61, an unnamed and unknown speaker announces a special vocation that has been given by God, a vocation is about the renewal of a community. Three things are noted: first, the work is authorized by the Spirit of God; second, the speaker is anointed, designated and empowered by God; third, the given work is to bring the good news to 'them'. The identity of 'them' is soon revealed when the contents of good news are explained. It is for the oppressed as the good news is to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and release to the prisoners, to comfort all who mourn. Here the oppressed includes all who are defeated and deprived by the power of the world physically and spiritually. But interestingly, the work of all of these binding, proclaiming, releasing and comforting will be done by the oppressed who will receive the good news. That is, the recipients of the good news will become the agents of the work of the good news. Isn't it remarkable? But how is it possible? What sort of power does the good news have?

We have general ideas about the good news: when we have a medical check, and all the results of the examinations appear normal, it is good news. When we are indebted to someone, and if we are able to pay it back, it may also be good news. As in the story of *Good news Bad news*, a positive outlook on life may be one of the things to make life good. But psychologists inform that we human beings have evolved to survive through learning from negative experiences. We do remember negative information more and better than the positive one. Negative experience will be well stored in our long-term memory too. The survival instinct based on the negative experiences has enabled human beings to have dominion over every living thing on earth. So far, so good! But at the same time, dealing with life issues based on our past experiences can be stressful. It has also prevented us from seeing these issues from new and radical perspectives that are not based on our experiences. Scripture says that the good news doesn't depend on our human experiences either past or present at all. Rather, it comes from the promise of God, who is the creator and author of life. And we need a messenger/s of the good news who will deliver it to us.

### 2. The messenger(s) of the good news

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<sup>1</sup> *New Zealand Listener*, December 12-18 2020, PP 16-21

In Isaiah 61, the speaker driven by God's Spirit and anointed by God's authority is commissioned to deliver 'good news' to the oppressed back to power and constructive action. The good news here is not a pious or religious act. It is rather an intervention into economic life that will break the cycle of indebtedness. The phrase 'proclaim liberty'<sup>2</sup> according to the old tradition of Torah, means cancellation of debts and the rehabilitation of poor people.<sup>3</sup> Scholars say that the 'year of the Lord's favour' and 'the day of vengeance' refer to the jubilee year,<sup>4</sup> when disadvantaged, indebted people are restored to their full, common rights and power in the community. *As such*, it is no wonder that the ones rehabilitated and comforted are marked by gladness, praise and called 'oaks of righteousness'<sup>5</sup>

God is working to reorder the world of injustice towards God's kingdom through two things: first, God will recompense the defeated/the oppressed for their effort. Their reward is comfort and peace, which will sustain them continually. Second, God will be with them through 'an everlasting covenant.' Once they have been considered powerless and defeated. But now they will be regarded as people of God. It is because of God's preference, and because of a human agent who intervenes into deprived living conditions. The messenger of good news delights in his mission, for he has been equipped by the power of salvation and righteousness. John had been a messenger of the good news, whose prophecy was realized when Jesus was born. In Luke 4:18-19, Jesus quite specifically claims this text in Isaiah 61:1- 4 for his definition and vocation. He was the one who will liberate the defeated/the oppressed. No wonder the beneficiaries of injustice were 'filled with rage' at his subversive words and his dangerous action.<sup>6</sup> The good news together with the messenger didn't come to restore economic injustice only but to restore life as a whole in all dimensions.

### ***3. Christian life as good news to the world***

The power of the good news makes the recipients of the good news to become the agents of it. In our story time - *Good news Bad news* by Jeff Mack, the question was, 'what is the good news for you in this story?' We observe two different attitudes to life: whatever things happen, the rabbit seems to see a positive side of the event while the mouse sees things from the opposite. When we encounter a new situation, doubts and suspicion may be helpful as we may reduce hidden dangers or risks. But if undesired things happen already, holding resentment and living in despair continually are not helpful. We may lose things that we still have in the present time as well. In the story, the rabbit seems to enjoy her life more than the mouse. Yet the mouse's strong denial of any good in any event, the rabbit's positive Spirit seems finally defeated. Yet seeing the rabbit's miserable response, the mouse eventually understands that despite all the situations, his friend rabbit has been with him by helping him see positive side of the event. The rabbit was the messenger of good news for the mouse and eventually the mouse, too become the agent of the good news.

Being bearers of the good news of Jesus Christ is not different. It is like sitting an exam while knowing all the answers to the questions. If we know that all will be well in the end, we can maintain a positive outlook no matter what circumstances we are in. As seen in the case of the rabbit and the mouse, it also affects our relationships with others. But, to become powerful agents of the good news, we have to live the good news through our whole beings by all means. It is only after that we will be the agents of the powerful good news of Christ, who will repair, restore and rebuild in every dimension of life. May God help us know that we are the anointed ones as the followers of Christ Jesus, and we will continue the salvific work that Jesus has started. Amen.

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<sup>2</sup> Isaiah 61:1

<sup>3</sup> Leviticus: 25:10 - And you shall hallow the fiftieth year, and you shall proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you: you shall return, every one of you, to your property and every one of you to your family. Cf Jeremiah: 34:8, 15, 17

<sup>4</sup> Leviticus 25

<sup>5</sup> Isaiah 61:3

<sup>6</sup> Luke 4:28