

The Year of the Lord's Favour

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- [0 : 0 0] This is the evening service at Holy Trinity on the 2nd of May 1999. The preacher is Paul Barker.
- His sermon is entitled The Year of the Lord's Favor and is from Isaiah chapter 61 verses 1 to 11.
- In 1847 a manifesto was published that would change the course of history. Most of our lives have in some way been impacted by that work.
- And yet today it lies basically in tatters. That manifesto opposed religion, was anti-Christian and sought to overthrow capitalism.
- It was written by Karl Marx. Last year another manifesto was published. I suspect in 150 years time nobody will remember it or talk about it.
- [1 : 1 1] It will probably just barely write a mention in the history books. Far less profound and far less influential I suspect. It was John Howard's GST manifesto.
- But I still guess we await to see whether it will also one day lie in tatters. People, not least politicians, publish manifestos.
- Every election that comes around there are manifestos about this, that or the other reform or counter-reform that somebody is pledging to do. Some of them are influential. Some of them are influential.
- Most of them are not. Some of them are fulfilled. Most of them are not. Isaiah 61 is like a manifesto.
- It's often been regarded that way. Especially it's opening few verses. You may like to have them open in front of you. Page 603 in the Black Bibles under the seats in front of you.
- [2 : 0 9] And like John Howard's manifesto, it's also a GST. It's God's servant's tasks. Because that is the person who's speaking.
- It is the servant of God as we'll see later on. At one level it looks political. The release of prisoners. That's something that often appears in political manifestos.
- In the negotiations in Northern Ireland and Britain and Ireland in recent years, the release of prisoners has been a central part of the negotiations. But more profoundly, this manifesto is thoroughly spiritual.
- As we shall see. Three questions. What does this manifesto pledge? Who is the one who will accomplish it?
- And does it today lie in tatters or not? What does it pledge? Firstly, it pledges preaching.
- [3 : 1 4] He has sent me. God has sent me. This speaker servant says. To bring good news. To preach, that is. To speak words.
- To people who are oppressed. It looks like something that any left-wing politician might say. They always seem to be on the favour of the oppressed and poor. Or so they like us to believe.

The oppressed are those who are downtrodden. Weak. A fairly general term. Although, of course, if the hearers of these words were Israel in Babylon, then the oppressors are certainly the Babylonians.

But it's not just hot air and empty words. There is action as well. So the next line. To bind up the brokenhearted. To proclaim something and then to do something.

To bind up or bandage up, literally, the brokenhearted. When a wound bleeds, we put a bandage around it.

[4 : 17] But this is talking about something deeper than just a mere flesh wound. This is talking about binding up a broken or ill heart. It's clearly a metaphor because we can't really bind up our heart with a bandage.

It's not just talking about people who are brokenhearted because they've lost their lover or something like that. The hearts need binding up because they are sinful and evil.

The very first chapter of this book makes that clear. That Israel's heart is bleeding and sick because of its sin. And now at last, after 60 chapters, comes the promise of one to bind up the sinful heart.

You see, the promise here is not just a physical manifesto, but a spiritual one. Dealing with the core of Israel's problems. Not just putting a little ointment on the spots, on the outside, on the symptoms.

But dealing with the root cause, the sinful heart. And this servant speaks a manifesto pledging to deal with that.

[5 : 31] This manifesto will correct everything that is wrong spiritually with the people of God. The ancient Israelites. The end of verse 1, in a sense, repeats both things.

To proclaim liberty to the captives and release to the prisoners. Speaking and action. Again, we're not talking just about political prisoners.

Nor even just about Israel enslaved in Babylon. But rather those who are enslaved to their own sin. Not just hot air.

But word and action together. 1999 is the year of the aged.

We've already had years of children. I think we've had years of refugees and years of animals. And I think I recall a year of living dangerously. None of these years ever seem to apply to me.

[6 : 33] I always seem to miss out. But I reckon if I live long enough, they'll be so desperate enough to find something new. That there'll be a year of single left-handed Richmond supporters. And I might be the only one of them.

This manifesto announces a year. It is the year of the Lord's favour. The beginning of verse 2. That's an odd expression at first.

A year of the Lord's favour. As though like these sort of United Nations years, we can think about the age this year. But January the 1st next year, forget all the age. Send them off to some home and let's have another year for some other purpose.

As though the year of the Lord's favour lasts only 365 days. The background to this idea is probably important. Embedded in the early laws of the Old Testament is the law about what was called the Jubilee year.

The 50th year. The end of a series of 7 times 7 years. There would be a year when all debts would be remitted, slaves would be freed and land returned to its original owners. Fairly radical law and we're not even sure that it was ever kept.

[7 : 42] But that seems to be the year that lies behind this proclamation of the year of the Lord's favour in verse 2. The year of the Lord's favour is the year when slavery to sin will end.

Restoration not to land but to God himself will be there for God's people. This manifesto is anticipating not just one in a series of 50th year jubilees.

But the great jubilee. Year of the Lord. And in contrast to it, verse 2 mentions a day of the Lord's vengeance or a day of vengeance.

Clearly far outweighing vengeance is the Lord's favour. I think the comparison is deliberate. A year of favour.

Just one day of vengeance. Clearly emphasis is on favour in this chapter and if you want details of vengeance, then we need to jump through to chapter 63. But the vengeance is certainly that against God's enemies and against the enemies of God's people.

[8 : 57] For the Israelites in exile, it is the promise that the Babylonians will receive their just desserts. But Isaiah quickly skips over vengeance and returns to the theme of favour.

Verse 2 ends, To comfort all who mourn. That's part of the manifesto. Part of the pledge of this servant's document. Not just mourning for those who are bereaved, who've lost a spouse or a grandparent or a dog or something like that.

But rather mourning in these chapters leading up to this is for those who are mourning their sin. Those who are sorrowful and indeed repentant for their sin. That's the mourning that is being addressed here.

Those who grieve their own sin. And how God is going to provide comfort to them is explained three ways in the next verse. Verse 3. He'll provide for those who mourn in Zion three things.

And each of them is instead of something else. Instead of this, he'll give this. Three times that contrast is made. Instead of ashes, he'll give them a garland.

[10 : 05] Or a crown. Or some headwear that is festive and joyful. Instead of mourning, there'll be the oil of gladness. Perhaps some anointing oil or special perfume that was used for special occasions of joy and festivity.

Instead of a faint or broken or downhearted spirit, a mantle of praise, a cloak or great big rug of praise to wrap around you.

The hair, the top of the head, the garland, the face covered with the oil, the whole body surrounded by the mantle or cloak. This person is engulfed with joy and praise.

They've gone from being a mourner to a party dude, in a sense. Festive clothes from top to bottom. This is a serious statement of joy.

The result? They will be called oaks of righteousness. The planting of the Lord to display his glory. Again, Isaiah chapter 1 is a contrast to this.

[11 : 18] Where the sins of God's people meant a sort of stultified and withering growth that doesn't really bear fruit. And this growth now is a result of this servant's manifesto.

Oaks of righteousness. Oaks which are grand and resilient trees. A contrast to the Israel before. You see, the result of this servant's manifesto will be in effect a new people.

A people who's been changed from the inside out. Whose hearts have been bandaged up. No longer full of sin and wickedness and evil. No longer lacking justice and righteousness.

As the early chapters of Isaiah describe God's people. But now in effect a new people. Even a new creation we could say. People who are righteous. Through the work of this servant and his manifesto.

Sin done away with. We're told how the servant brings righteousness back in chapter 53. Which we saw on Good Fridays through that servant's death. Now at last people fulfilling their original calling.

[12 : 27] To bring God glory. As the end of verse 3 says. Israel hasn't displayed God's glory. It has displayed its own wickedness and self-exaltation and pride.

But through this servant's work. God's glory will be seen in the world. The reversal from mourning to joy.

From sin to righteousness. Carries over in verses 4 to 7. With more reversal going on. Firstly they will build up ancient ruins.

And raise up the devastated city. And cities. At the first level it seems to be suggesting. The rebuilding of Jerusalem. And its surrounding cities in Judah.

And certainly a few years. After the exile ended. Jerusalem's temple began to be rebuilt. And a few more decades down the track. No doubt other towns in Jerusalem's walls.

[13 : 29] And so on. But this is going further. We deprive this manifesto. Of its full meaning.

If we think it is only speaking about towns and cities. For we've already seen. That in the light of Isaiah's own words. This is spiritual restoration.

The rebuilding that this is hinting towards. Is a restoration or rebuilding of lives. With God. Not just the cities. Of people.

And then in verse 5. An odd promise. That strangers and foreigners will look after the flocks and vines. Flocks and vines are clearly signs of blessing.

So embedded here is a statement of promise. That now at last there will be flocks and vines to look after. Hence the statement of God's blessing. But to have foreigners and strangers look after them is perhaps unexpected.

[14 : 28] But again it's a reversal of fortunes for God's people. Who are now serving foreigners. And doing their menial tasks. The reversal that God's servant will bring about.

Will bring in foreigners. To serve God's people. But again maybe it's speaking or hinting at. Or pushing on towards a greater spiritual truth I think.

That Gentiles. People who aren't Jews. Will be embraced by Jews. By the people of God of the Old Testament. Embraced by their God.

Indeed as we'll see and have seen in recent weeks. Come to worship and honour the God of Israel. As well. Notice that the reversal.

That's going on here is not that. Instead of Babylon oppressing Israel. Israel will oppress Babylon. The strangers and foreigners of verse 5.

[15 : 32] Seem happily accommodated by Israel. Rather than being oppressed by them. Indeed the role of God's people in the world. Will not be the oppressor.

Through this servant's manifesto. But rather they shall be priests. Verse 6 tells us that God's people shall be called priests of the Lord.

You shall be named ministers of our God. God's people. God's people. God's people. God's people. God's people. God's people. That's not a new idea. For at the very early time of the nationhood of God's people Israel.

Came this job description. They were to be God's priests in the world. The idea is straightforwardly an idea of mediation.

God's people will mediate God to the world. To the nations. To the Gentiles. They won't just keep him for themselves. But consistently in Israel's history.

[16 : 36] From the time at Mount Sinai under the leadership of Moses. When those words were said in Exodus. That Israel would be priests. All the way through the intervening seven centuries. To this point of Isaiah. Israel had failed to be God's priests in the world.

They'd abused their privilege. And had abrogated their responsibility. To be priests. For the sake of the world. God's people are always priests to the world.

The title is applied to Christians in the New Testament. It therefore applies to us no less. Our role as God's people. Is not to abuse the privilege of salvation.

And intimacy with God. But rather to mediate that to a world. That is desperately in need of it. Now at last.

God's people will fulfill their role. Is what verse 6 is saying. You shall be called. You shall be named. The implication is not so much by God. But by the nations.

[17 : 41] They will call you priests. Because your role will be effective. And its effectiveness is seen in the second half of the verse. Because the wealth of the nations. And their riches. Shall be brought in to God's people.

A theme we saw two weeks ago. In chapter 60. In exile and sin. Israel was full of shame and dishonor.

Doubly so. Verse 7 tells us. But now they'll possess a double portion of joy. The first born son. The first born son. Would receive a double portion of the inheritance.

According to Old Testament law. So if you're a parent with two sons. When you die. The elder would have two thirds of your wealth.

The younger one third. Israel is God's first born people. Theirs will be the double portion. Of joy from God.

[18 : 39] Not to exclude the Gentiles. To place God's people Israel. In its proper place in a sense. Theirs will be double joy. Their shame.

And dishonor. Was also double. Now undergirding all of this manifesto. Is God's own character. He is a God of justice and faithfulness.

Verse 8 tells us. He loves justice. He hates robbery and wrongdoing. And he will faithfully. That is with faithfulness. Give them their recompense. And make an everlasting covenant with his people.

That is a consistent part of God's character. Throughout scripture. It is because of his character. That this manifesto exists in the first place.

But his faithfulness in particular. Is brought to attention in the verse that follows. The descendants of Israel will be known among the nations. Their offspring among the peoples.

[19 : 39] All who see them shall acknowledge that they are a people whom the Lord has blessed. They are not new ideas either. It is not a new promise. Those words hark back even earlier in the Old Testament.

Than the idea of priests. For to Abraham. Perhaps even 1300 years before Isaiah's day. Was made the promise. Was made the promise.

Of a large offspring. Progeny. And blessing to the world through them. And now is their reassurance that that promise is not in tatters.

God is keeping it. And his servant's manifesto. Will bring about its fulfillment and accomplishment. This manifesto you see is no small task.

It's more than political liberation. They're not looking for a great political hero here. It is a task of spiritual restoration to God himself.

[20 : 40] No doubt for some of Isaiah's hearers. They would have anticipated its fulfillment with eagerness. Others perhaps with indifference.

But many of them may well have been perplexed. Pondering. Who on earth. Could achieve all this. Who on earth could do this.

Who on earth could bind up sinful hearts. And make them righteous. Before God. No wonder the chapter begins.

With the statement of a special endowment from God. The spirit of the Lord God is upon me. Because the Lord has anointed me. And again for readers of Isaiah.

Who've heard his earlier words. Two figures come to mind. Brought together here. The one on whom the spirit of the Lord rests. Is God's servant. In chapter 42.

[21 : 43] Whose subsequent chapters tell us. Dies. For God's people. To bring them righteousness. But going back even earlier than 42. We find another figure.

This time a figure. Not so much a servant. But a king. Descended from David. Also anointed. By God's spirit. The one whose manifesto this is.

Is both servant. And king. The one the Old Testament. Does look forward to. Though it's sometimes obscure.

In Isaiah. Perhaps of all places in the Old Testament. Becomes clear. A kingly servant. An odd combination. A king who will die for God's people.

In their place. To bring them righteousness. When I lived in England. I lived in a relatively posh town.

[22 : 45] Called Cheltenham. And it had lots of fairly. Well to do shops. And the first week I was there. I needed a pair of black socks. So I thought I'd just go to the nearest black sock seller.

To buy some black socks. The nearest black sock seller. Happened to be a company by the name of. Gieves and Hawks. Gentleman's Outfitters.

I did ask. About socks. The cheapest pair of black socks. Costs. Cost the equivalent of more than 30 Australian dollars.

Which for a person. Beginning three years of full time study. Seemed rather intimidating. I declined the offer. And found Marks and Spencers instead.

But I like the expression. Gentlemen's Outfitters. I didn't think I was ever a gentleman. So I don't know that I ever went back into the shop. Even though I walked past it. Virtually every week.

[23 : 48] In verse 10. Of this chapter. God is the servant's outfitter. He's the one who provides the clothes.

For the servant. The servant rejoices. At the beginning of verse 10. And the reason for his rejoicing. Is that God has clothed me. With the garments of salvation.

He's covered me. With the robe of righteousness. As a bridegroom decks himself. With a garland. And as a bride adorns herself. With her jewels. And the image that came to my mind.

Reading these verses. Was of the servant walking into Gieves and Hawks. This beautiful little shop. Very posh. Very expensive. Fine quality clothes.

Standing before a full length mirror. With God the outfitter. Giving him the robes of righteousness. And the garland like a bridegroom. And jewels what's more. To wear as well.

[24 : 43] And no doubt. Black socks. Now this servant is not just boasting in wearing posh clothes.

He's not one of those pompous people. Who walks around parading the latest outfit. At the Melbourne Cup. Or something like that. Clothes. Clothes. Clothes reflect character. Time and again in the Bible.

That's the case. In the New Testament. You may know the verse that says. Put on then. Clothe yourselves then. As God's chosen ones. Holy and beloved. Compassion. Kindness. Meekness. And so on. They're the metaphors made explicit.

Clothes are about character. And it's the same at the end of the Bible. With the robes of fine linen. That God's saints wear. Here too.

The clothes of this servant. Are righteousness. God's own character. That's why it's God who is the outfitter. Of the servant. The servant will reflect the very character of God.

[25 : 41] He will display and wear righteousness. But that's not all. It's not just that his job is to parade righteousness before an unrighteous world.

But rather through him. Shall righteousness spread. Verse 11 changes the metaphor. But it talks about the spreading. For as the earth brings forth its shoots.

And this same person was called a shoot back in chapter 11. And as a garden causes what is sown in it to spring up. So the Lord God will cause righteousness and praise to spring up before all the nations.

The idea here is that the servant will bring and make. Bring righteousness and make many righteous. That's his job. That's what it is to be restored to God after all.

That's what it is to be freed from sins. And released from its captivity. To become righteous. In God's sight. That's his job.

[26 : 42] And this chapter is telling us that he will accomplish it. Notice also that his joy is God centered. His joy at the beginning of verse 10 is rejoicing in the Lord.

He doesn't parade up and down the streets. Grand streets of Cheltenham. Boasting and full of joy because of his clothes. Oh what joy the robes that I'm wearing. The joy is joy in the giver of the robes.

It is thoroughly God centered. His eyes not for his garment. So much as the garment's giver. And his joy is intense.

The word is about exuberance. Not just a little smile on his face. Isaiah didn't live to see the day that these words were fulfilled.

Sometime after Isaiah's day. The people did after exile return to their land. But these words weren't fulfilled.

[27 : 51] Centuries passed. Until one day in a very obscure back block. Of Palestine. In a synagogue. Fairly unpretentiously in a sense.

Some bloke got up. And read these words. From verses 1 and 2. The spirit of the Lord is upon me. Because he has anointed me.

To bring good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives. And recovery of sight to the blind. To let the oppressed go free. To proclaim the year of the Lord's favor. Nothing too unusual in that.

Quoting the Bible for ancient Jews. He rolled up the scroll. Gave it back to the attendant. And sat down. But the eyes of everyone were fixed on him.

And then he said. Today. This scripture. Has been fulfilled. In your hearing. In your hearing. A fairly outrageous claim.

[29 : 06] Jesus spoke those words in Nazareth. They're not words of political liberation. Though many understand them as being purely that. They are words of spiritual restoration.

They are words of freedom from sin. An end to exile. Not from land. But from God. They are words ushering in the real jubilee. The year of the Lord's favor.

The one who spoke those words in the preceding chapter in Luke. Was anointed with God's Holy Spirit. At his baptism in the river Jordan. It is he.

Jesus. Who is the servant king. And his task. Was to make many righteous. That's what he's on about.

Restoring people of any nation to God. Binding up sinful hearts. Making them clean. Bringing people. Jew and Gentile together. In a relationship with God.

[30 : 10] That's what he's on about. That's what his manifesto was about. It's not just a political statement. It is thoroughly about spiritual restoration to God. Isaiah 61 is Jesus' manifesto.

The GST. God's servant's task. But the final question is. Does it lie in tatters? Or is it fulfilled? It does not lie in tatters.

Like Marx's manifesto. But on the other hand. It remains yet to be totally fulfilled. This is still the year of the Lord's favor.

Elsewhere in the New Testament makes that clear. This is the time of good news. This is the time of the gospel. This is the time for binding up sin. And dealing with it. And bringing forgiveness and reconciliation. To people and to God.

This is the time for restoring humanity to God. Now is the time for that. To borrow an old election slogan. That some of you weren't alive for. It is time. Now is the time.

[31 : 16] But Jesus stopped short. When he took that quote. From Isaiah 61. He proclaimed the year of the Lord's favor. But he was silent.

About the day of vengeance. Had he forgotten it? Had someone torn it out of his scroll? The servant king came firstly.

To announce the year of the Lord's favor. A year in which we still live. But when he comes again. As he is certainly going to do.

Then. He shall come for the day of vengeance. Vengeance. But meanwhile. Now is the time. Now is the time.

To be part of that servant's task. Now is time. To be righteous. Through his righteousness. Now is the time. To make sure. That you are right with God. For that time.

[32 : 15] Will not last forever. That year. Is not an endless year. The day of vengeance. Is coming. Jesus made that abundantly clear.

The first time he came. There is an urgency. About the offer. Of Jesus the servant king. Don't miss it.

Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you. Thank you.