



SPIRIT-EMPOWERED TRANSFORMATION

Derek Balsdon

DEREK BALSDON, WHO SERVED AS MET DEVELOPMENT WORKER, CONSIDERS HOW JESUS' MANIFESTO BRINGS TRANSFORMATION

*The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor
He has sent me to
proclaim freedom for the prisoners,
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to release the oppressed,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.*

Luke 4:18-19

These verses can be viewed as Jesus' manifesto. They speak of being anointed by the Holy Spirit to bring good news to the poor through evangelism and justice. In the synagogue at Nazareth, Jesus was handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. He read most of Isaiah 61:1-2, but stopped short of reading the end of v. 2, and I will return to that later. Jesus then claimed to be the One to fulfil those prophetic words. They were perfectly fulfilled in and through Spirit-anointed Jesus, and this article considers how they can be partially fulfilled through us today.

In Luke 3, we read that, when Jesus was baptised, the Holy Spirit descended upon him, and Father God affirmed Jesus as his beloved Son. Luke 4 starts with the temptations of Jesus, and that is followed in Luke 4:14-30 with Jesus in Nazareth. In 2017 I visited Nazareth, went to what is known as the Synagogue Church, where I was honoured to read these words to our group. It was wonderful to read them so close to their original setting.

Many preachers pray through Luke 4:18-19 before going to preach. I used to feel that it was somewhat presumptuous to pray these words over myself, and then I read 'The Heart of Revival' by Nicky Gumbel, based on Isaiah chapters 40 - 66. Nicky encourages his readers to claim Isaiah 61:1-2a for their lives and ministries. Reading that passage has helped me feel more at ease praying them for myself. Why not pray those words for yourself and the ministry the Lord has called you to exercise? Like John the Baptist, I recognise that we are not worthy even to untie Jesus' sandals, yet he wants to speak and work powerfully through his followers.

WHAT IS YOUR EXPERIENCE OF GOD'S SPIRIT?

Luke 4:14 amazes me: 'Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit.' The temptations hadn't weakened Jesus; he came out of the desert in the power of the Spirit. Whatever we are going through personally, the power of the Spirit can still anoint our words and actions.

After reading Isaiah 61:1-2a Jesus said, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing'. He made a staggering claim, for which many of the people rejected him. In the past, God's

Spirit had anointed a few of Israel's faithful prophets, priests, kings, and crafts people. But what was this local upstart doing, claiming to be anointed with the Spirit? They drove him out of the town, and tried to throw him down a cliff; they acted unjustly against the One who was bringing God's justice.

As Jesus then embarked upon his earthly ministry, the Spirit flowed through his authoritative teaching and glorious miracles, and many lives were touched and transformed by God's love. How did Jesus continue in the power of the Spirit? He did so, through nurturing his relationship with the Father and the Spirit, by spending time in prayer and by faithfully obeying his Father's calling. By following Jesus' example of nurture and obedience, we can also continue with the anointing of God's Spirit.

Prevenient Grace is the belief that God's Spirit is at work in our lives before we become Christians. Some Christians experience being filled with God's Spirit at conversion, whereas for others it is a subsequent experience. I am less concerned about when individuals were filled with God's Spirit, but more concerned about them being currently filled. The present reality is more important than a past experience.

WHO ARE 'THE POOR' IN THIS 21ST CENTURY?

No matter how long we have been a Christian, and no matter how strong our faith is, we are still somewhat spiritually impoverished; but there is still more Good News for us. We share God's love believing that through us others will be enriched by the Father, by Jesus and by the Holy Spirit.

There are also millions of people in this country, and millions more around the world who are physically impoverished; those who have little money for the basic needs of life. The increasing cost of living is causing massive financial challenges for so many people in the UK and around the world. How is God's Spirit wanting you to assist those who are physically poor?

Jesus fulfilled this manifesto by sharing the Good News of God with whoever he came across, women and men, children

and adults, ordinary people and religious leaders. Jesus was, and still is, Good News in this 21st century.

EVANGELISM AND SOCIAL JUSTICE

After visiting the Holy Land, I did some further study, and wrote a paper about Jesus' words in relation to contemporary politics in the Middle East, focusing on Luke 4. My studying broadened my appreciation of Jesus' manifesto. Up until then I had mainly viewed it in spiritual terms, with a slight recognition of their social side. I now see them as being just as much social as spiritual. It is not that their spiritual meaning has lessened, but that their social meaning has increased. Evangelism and Justice are like the two sides of a coin, both essential to the whole. John Wesley birthed the Methodist movement in evangelism and justice.

WHO ARE 'THE PRISONERS' IN THIS 21ST CENTURY?

Jesus continued, 'He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners'. Pause for a few moments and consider, 'Who are 'the prisoners' in this 21st century?

21st century prisoners include those who are:

- not experiencing Jesus' forgiveness
- feeling guilty for their wrongs
- physically locked up in prison
- addicted
- suffering hurt and/or abuse
- victims within modern day slavery and the sex industry
- trapped in spiralling debt
- feeling like prisoners in their own country
- within the asylum seeker systems

In the spiritual sense, Jesus continues to set people free from the prison of sin. Medical doctors and counsellors are aware that many of their patients would feel so much better if they could experience forgiveness and freedom from guilt. In the light of this, in my sharing of the Good News I now speak more about freedom from guilt and less about forgiveness of sin. Many people today don't recognise that they are sinners, yet they do know that they feel guilty. The Good News is that through



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In the autumn of 2021, REVIVE: the MET Prayer Weekend took place. The theme was 'Living Through Forgiving', and I spoke about the freedom which God wants us to experience through lamenting, forgiving others and accepting his total forgiveness. That weekend enabled people to experience greater freedom in Jesus Christ.

'Freedom for the prisoners' also has a justice side. Across the world, and across this county, there are many people caught in the poverty trap, and many feel imprisoned by debt. Lots of people are trapped in abusive relationships. As individuals and as churches we need to help such people find freedom, and that can be through things like supporting Food Banks, running Christians Against Poverty schemes, offering counselling and so on.

The following is taken from a Tearfund email dated 7/2/2020:

After spending 12 years in a Rwandan jail for his involvement in the 1994 genocide, Claude was released. But it didn't fix things. 'It was very difficult,' says Claude. 'In my mind, I was still in prison.' Claude's wife bore the brunt of his guilt. He mistreated her, and drank heavily, using up the family's food money. Then, staff from our (Tearfund's) local church partner invited him to come to a meeting. The pastor was sharing Luke 4:18... Claude says: "Freedom for the prisoners!" It was when I heard the declaration of Jesus that I was free of prison, that's when I felt in my mind really free'.

As Claude met the unconditional love of Jesus, he also found courage to approach the people he needed forgiveness from - the family members of those he had killed. That same love gave them grace to forgive him. The change in Claude has brought reconciliation in his community and his home. He treats his wife well and is an active member of our church partner programme, which helps people work together to build their faith and

grow their resources. He used to be an enemy in the community, he says, but now he is a friend. 'I am living in harmony with the people whose family members I killed.' Claude's world looks truly different.

When Jesus was proclaiming his mission in Luke 4:18, there must have been sceptics who asked how he was going to do this. However, every day we see people like Claude released from the shackles of social, economic and spiritual poverty. It is a confirmation of Christ's proclamation to the world.'

What a powerful example of the freedom from prison that Jesus brings into peoples' lives in this 21st century. Let's confidently proclaim the Good News that God's transforming love helps release people from the shackles of social, economic and spiritual poverty.

WHO ARE 'THE BLIND' IN THIS 21ST CENTURY?

Jesus continued, 'and recovery of sight for the blind'. This covers 3 broad areas: to do with self, to do with God and to do with others. It concerns those who need healing for physical and mental health issues - personal well-being. It involves seeing and experiencing God more clearly - spiritual well-being. It also concerns- seeing the needs of others, and acting to help and to bring about justice; the well-being of society. The two greatest commandments are to love God with our all, and to love our neighbours as ourselves. In a similar way, the recovery of sight for the blind involves seeing God, seeing ourselves and seeing others in clearer ways.

Through his earthly ministry Jesus opened the eyes of the physically blind, as well as performing many other miraculous healings. Jesus also helped people to see God more clearly, to see themselves as precious to God, and he encouraged them to love and serve others in good and godly ways. Helping others to see God more clearly, to see themselves more dearly, and to see the needs of others more plainly is all part of God's transforming love in this 21st century.



WHO ARE 'THE OPPRESSED' IN THIS 21ST CENTURY?

Jesus continued, 'to release the oppressed'. Jesus freed people from sin, from evil spirits, from cultural stigmas such as cleansing lepers and healing women with blood issues, from the legalism of the Pharisees, and women from being the underdogs, etc.

Release for the oppressed has some overlap with the previous two phrases, yet goes deeper. Many people, even some Christians, can't seem to find freedom from some past sins. Many people, including some Christians, are suffering from a wide range of addictions: drugs, gambling, pornography, alcohol, greed, to name a few. Many people, including Christians, are oppressed, having suffered from broken relationships or abuse. Many people, especially young people, are getting caught up in gangs, County Lines drug trafficking and sexual exploitation. There are also many people who have evil spirits within them. Jesus wants to set them free. The good news is that Jesus can help release people from any form of oppression. Sometimes he does it instantly, at other times he takes a little longer. Whether freedom happens instantly or over a period of time, it is still the work of Jesus releasing the oppressed.

We hear so much bad news that it can

somewhat overshadow the good news. One thing that helps me continue believing that Jesus is good news is reading about lives transformed by the love of God. Some time ago I read 'Taming of a Villain,' the story of Allen Langham. I quote:

'There was some kind of revival going on in the prison at the time, with inmates committing their lives to Jesus. A newspaper at the time published an editorial headed "There is an answer to the drugs dilemma!" It included the following statement: "Anglican prison chaplain David Powe, currently based in Belmarsh in south-east London, is seeing hundreds of criminals find real purpose to their lives through the 'power' of the gospel."

A few months ago, I was privileged to hear Tanya speak. She is a Ukrainian married to a Russian, and their mission work in Ukraine involves evangelism and justice. Tanya shared that in Mariupol, 100 adults and children were sheltering in the basement of a school, and realised that they had to flee quickly. Even though their cars had been damaged by gunshot, amazingly they all managed to reach safety. Tanya also mentioned that an elderly man had run out of food and prayed that the Lord would provide, and the next day their mission team knocked on his door and gave him a food parcel. Even in the midst of devastation, destruction and death, people are experiencing God's transforming love. And of course, all those who are supporting and housing Ukrainians and others are working for justice.

THE YEAR OF THE LORD'S FAVOUR

Jesus stopped short of reading what came next, 'and the day of vengeance of our God' (Isaiah 61:2b). Perhaps he didn't include the words about God's judgement because he would bear the wrath against sin as he died in our place.

'The year of the Lord's favour' is similar to Mark 1:15 'The time has come, the kingdom of God is near'. Here, the word 'year' doesn't mean 12 months, but an era. In this era between Jesus' earthly ministry and his final coming, everyone can experience the Lord's favour, the transforming love of the Father, Jesus

and the Holy Spirit. In the 1st century, as Jesus carried out his earthly mission, he offered the Lord's favour to everyone, and in this 21st century the Holy Spirit anoints us to offer God's blessings and benefits to others, so we can be agents of his transforming work.

In the Old Testament we learn that every 50th year was to be a jubilee, a year to free people from their debts, release slaves, and return property to the Assignor; a year of the Lord's favour. Jesus' manifesto ended with 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,' or in other words 'to proclaim the Lord's Jubilee'. The freedom that Jesus offers to us and to others is certainly something worth proclaiming. The jubilee year of God's favour was once every 50 years, whereas, through Jesus Christ, every year is one of God's favour, and every day is the day of God's favour. Every day our Spirit-anointed words and works can be channels for God's transforming love to minister into the lives of others.

FOR REFLECTION...

The more of God's favour that we ourselves experience, the more his favour will flow through us and make a transforming difference to the lives of those around us. God's Spirit wants all Christians to be anointed for evangelism and justice so that more and more people will experience his transforming love upon their lives and situations. Before turning the page, I invite you to pause, and spend a few minutes praying through the words of Luke 4:18-19, and claim them for yourself.

The Revd Derek Balsdon is a former Development Worker for MET and lives in Congleton with his wife Hilary.



THE POWER OF YOUR LOVE

Geoff Bullock

Lord I Come to You
Let my heart be changed, renewed,
Flowing from the grace
That I found in you.
And Lord, I've come to know
The weaknesses I see in me
Will be stripped away
By the power of your love.

*Hold me close,
Let your love surround me;
Bring me near, draw me to your side.
And as I wait,
I'll rise up like the eagle,
And I will soar with you,
Your Spirit leads me on
in the power of your love.*

Lord unveil my eyes,
Let me see you face to face,
The knowledge of your love
As you live in me.
Lord, renew my mind,
As your will unfolds in my life
In living every day
By the power of your love.