Isaiah 61:1-4;8-11

Sunday 14th Dec 10am

Archbishop of Canterbury, [Justin Welby](http://www.independent.co.uk/news/uk/hunger-crisis-stalking-britain-is-more-shocking-than-in-africa-says-archbishop-of-canterbury-9908731.html) stated this week the “simple but devastating fact that hunger stalks this country”. A record number of people are going to foodbanks - according to the Trussell trust it was 900,000 last year.  Families are driven to relying on food banks because of failures in the welfare system – sanctions, delays in payments, benefit caps, high utility bills to name but a few.

We know homelessness is on the rise – there are now 50 rough sleepers in Croydon – probably double previous years and our shelter has been full every week since it opened.

Poverty wastes people’s lives, too. Kids from families who are struggling tend to achieve a lot less in education than they are capable of because survival becomes more important than longer term aims. Michelle’s dad was pulled out of college so he could get a job and contribute to the family rather than get an education.

Poverty leaves many broken hearts, many captives, many wounded, hurt people imprisoned in grief and loss. Don’t get me wrong, perhaps there are unwise choices made too, but if you can’t get the basics the other stuff goes out of the window.

In Isaiah’s time, Israel is also full of broken hearts, too. They had experienced exile, carted off from their homeland, stripped of their identity and pride, and now some of them were trying to make a go of it back in Israel. Some had returned to their old lands and were really struggling to survive. Vineyards and olive groves had been destroyed, protective walls were in ruins, the temple was yet to be rebuilt. It was a time of grief, frustration and despair. The dream of carrying on life as it was before was fading. They were vulnerable, under attack from marauding bandits and hope was declining fast.

That may be true for people you know. Some people I know are just £100 away from financial disaster – they have no rainy day fund, no cushion against bad times. Doorstep lenders are the next option. What can we do or say to help?

Well in Isaiah there is the wonderful prophetic message, later on used by Jesus as a manifesto in Luke 4.

The Spirit of the Sovereign Lord is on me,  
    because the Lord has anointed me  
    to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent me to bind up the broken-hearted,  
    to proclaim freedom for the captives  
    and release from darkness for the prisoners,[[a](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=isa+61&version=NIVUK#fen-NIVUK-18845a)]  
**2**to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour  
    and the day of vengeance of our God,  
to comfort all who mourn,  
**3**    and provide for those who grieve in Zion –  
to bestow on them a crown of beauty  
    instead of ashes,  
the oil of joy  
    instead of mourning,  
and a garment of praise  
    instead of a spirit of despair

Firstly the message is we can’t do it on our own. In a situation that is dark and static we need some outside agency, some spark of energy to put in front of people the possibility of hope and change. This was the message to the broken people of Israel – that God would send his Spirit-anointed servant to “proclaim good news to the poor”, to the forgotten, to the people who don’t count for anything. These are the catalysts, the game changing people who spark a revolution. One of my favourites is the missionary Gladys Aylward – the humble, pioneer to China in the c20th, rejected by UK missionary societies and yet single-handedly changing the iniquitous practice of binding the feet of girls to make them look small, and risking her life many times to help those in need. She continued quietly running an orphanage until her death in 1970. Many lives touched, many lives released.

In our faith the source of this spark is Jesus, lighting up compassion, freedom and praise everywhere he goes, handing that baton onto others through his Holy Spirit. He is the beginning and end of our faith. In Him we can be personally restored to peace with God and peace with each other, to have our broken hearts bound, our grief comforted. In Him we can have our sins forgiven through his death on the cross.

Secondly, we can do something for ourselves.

I have read this passage many times but never noticed verse 4.

It says:

They will rebuild the ancient ruins  
    and restore the places long devastated;  
they will renew the ruined cities  
    that have been devastated for generations.

Who are the people referred to as “they”?

It is quite clear from the earlier verses that it is the same people who have been released, healed and comforted by the Spirit-filled Lord’s Servant.

In other words it is *they* themselves who are going to be doing the restoring, the renewing and rebuilding of a ruined society, not anyone else. And that is a radical thought.

How does that bring us to the present day? The other day I read an article about prisons in Texas, US. Until recently it had twice as many people locked up than the whole of the UK. It was extremely expensive to keep so many people behind bars. It was very wasteful of human lives too. Conservative right wing Texas tried something else ….I quote

*The Prison Entrepreneurship Programme, for instance, matches prisoners with businesspeople and settles them in a residential community on release. Its guiding values are Christian and its staff's motives seem to be love and hope for their "brothers", who in turn support the next batch of prisoners leaving jail.*

*Immediate, comprehensible and proportionate sanctions are given for bad behaviour, plus accountability to a kind leader and supportive community. This is the magic sauce of the programme.*

*Far from having to build new jails for the 17,000 expected new inmates, Texas has succeeded in closing three prisons.*

Did you notice, the prisoners are treated as brothers and are responsible for guiding the next batch of prisoners leaving jail. They are building a new society themselves. This is the call of Isaiah to his people – let God restore you then get stuck in into what needs doing around you!

The Archbishop last week praised the volunteers who run the food banks, saying “This extraordinary achievement has been done without the assistance of central government. If the Prime Minister wants to meet his Big Society, it is here.”

They are doing it for themselves, changing society bit by bit, with compassion, with kindness and of course with the co-operation and leadership of the authorities.

Advent is a time of reflection, realising we don’t live in a society which is perfect. Too long we been stuck in gloom and paralysis, unable to see a way out or a future. That is where Israel were. But in the midst of that gloom comes hope, hope of a saviour who proclaims that things can be different. That we can find peace and forgiveness, that we can find healing for our hurts and loss, who promises that

They will be called oaks of righteousness,  
    a planting of the Lord  
    for the display of his splendour.

And more than that, they will become agents of renewal themselves, rebuilding, renewing and restoring what has been broken.

I hope that both encourages and challenges you this Advent time.