

Title: Good News to the Poor
Text: Luke 4:16-21
Preacher: Rev Stu Cameron
Date: November 27, 2011

In Genesis we read that God created the earth and all it contains in six days. There were six days of creation, or work, and then on the seventh day God rested. In Exodus we read this:

It will be a sign between me and the Israelites forever, for in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, and on the seventh day he rested and was refreshed.
(Exodus 31:17)

The Hebrew word for refreshed is the word *nafash*, which literally is translated as catching one's breath. What a wonderful image. After six days creating electrons, protons and atoms – supernovas, galaxies and black holes – plant life, animal life and human beings in His image – God rests on the seventh day to catch his breath.

This rhythm of six days of work followed by a day of rest was established as the divine pattern for the right ordering for God's creation. Because God rested on the seventh day, then so too are those created in his image to rest from all work on the seventh day:

Remember the Sabbath day by keeping it holy. Six days you shall labor and do all your work...
For in six days the LORD made the heavens and the earth, the sea, and all that is in them, but he rested on the seventh day. Therefore the LORD blessed the Sabbath day and made it holy.
(Exodus 20:8-9, 11)

Sabbath rest is part of the rhythm of God's creation. God extends the sabbath principle from a day to a year when he commands the Israelites on how they should cultivate the land of promise he will give them:

For six years sow your fields, and for six years prune your vineyards and gather their crops. But in the seventh year the land is to have a year of sabbath rest, a sabbath to the LORD.
(Leviticus 25:3-4)

Every seventh year there would be no planting, pruning or reaping. The land and those who worked it to rest. But God extends the sabbath principle even further. Later in Leviticus 25 we read this:

Count off seven sabbath years—seven times seven years—so that the seven sabbath years amount to a period of forty-nine years... Consecrate the fiftieth year and proclaim liberty throughout the land to all its inhabitants. It shall be a jubilee for you; each of you is to return to your family property and to your own clan.
(Leviticus 25:8, 9)

This is what would happen. On the tenth day of the seventh month of the forty-ninth year on the Day of Atonement, a ram's horn – a shofar – would be blown across the land. From that moment forward for the next year a sabbath year would be observed and the land would rest. More than that, in the Jubilee year:

- Land was restored to its original line of inherited ownership.
- Israelite debt slaves were freed to return to their own land.

This requires a little explanation. The Hebrew understanding that only true owner of the land was God. Land was entrusted to clans and families as a gift from God. In ancient Israel land could be bought and sold only in the form of

what we would know as a long term lease. That is because every 49 years, in the Year of Jubilee, land would be returned to the family or clan God had originally entrusted it to. Every 49 years the slate would be wiped clean. Land could only be sold temporarily, not permanently. In ancient Israel, under the Jubilee principles, it would be impossible for a few wealthy landholders from accumulating all the land and enslaving the general population.

Similarly, an Israelite in financial difficulty could effectively sell themselves into slavery where their owner benefited from their work and they received the owner's protection. But every 49 years, in the Year of Jubilee, debt slaves were freed to go back to their family and clan. Shane Claiborne speaks of the Jubilee principles in this way:

Some might call (Jubilee) a regularly scheduled revolution.
(Shane Claiborne)

The principles of Jubilee were remembered, if not always applied by Israel through Old Testament times.

Centuries after Moses, the Israelites found themselves in captivity in Babylon. Effectively slaves in a foreign land, removed from the land of their heritage, the exiles seemed without hope. But God spoke to them through the prophet Isaiah of a Year of Jubilee – of a time of release from captivity and return to the land:

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 brokenhearted, to proclaim freedom for the captives and release from darkness for the prisoners, to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor.
(Isaiah 61:1-2)

Jerusalem fell to the Babylonians for the second time in 588BC. Most of its inhabitants were deported a year later in 587BC into exile. 49 years later (does that figure ring a bell?), in the year 538BC the mighty Babylonian empire fell to King Cyrus of Persia and the exiles were freed from foreign slavery to return to the promised land.

Roll forward five centuries and Israel has again suffered generations of foreign servitude; first the Persians, then the Greeks and now the Romans. They were effectively slaves in their own country. The principles of Sabbath year and jubilee were effectively no longer practiced. Isaiah's prophecy of a year of the Lord's favor – a year of Jubilee - is now interpreted by a new generation longing for a Messiah who will free them from Roman occupation.

Into this context of political, economic and social uncertainty a Rabbi from the back blocks of Galilee – miles from the centre of power in Jerusalem – begins to make a name for himself. He preaches powerfully and performs jaw-dropping miracles. It seems he has come from nowhere. By the time he comes to his home town of Nazareth, expectations are high. And so he speaks in the local synagogue. People are straining to hear what he says:

He stood up to read, and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

“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 set the oppressed free,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor.”

Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”
(Luke 4:16-21)

Jesus was making a radical claim. All of Israel's hopes for a messiah, a savior, a liberator were fulfilled in him. All of Israel's hopes for liberation from Roman bondage, for Jubilee were fulfilled in him. Every advent and Christmas season we celebrate that the entire world's longing for freedom and liberty are fulfilled in the coming of Christ. In Jesus, the trumpet of Jubilee has been sounded.

The Jubilee that Jesus offers looks like this:

- It's Good News for the Poor
- Its' freedom for prisoners
- It's recovery of sight for the blind
- It's liberation for the oppressed

Over these four weeks leading up to Christmas we will be exploring each of these Jubilee phrases and what they might mean in our day and age.

The first claim that Jesus makes for his mission is this; that he has been sent to proclaim good news to the poor.

Jesus Embodied God's Compassion for the Poor

Long before Jesus was born, God had expressed his absolute commitment and compassion for the poor. In God's world of abundance, poverty was an affront to the very nature and character of God. As Israel were about to enter the Promised Land, God spoke clearly to the people through Moses:

There need be no poor people among you, for in the land the LORD your God is giving you to possess as your inheritance, he will richly bless you.

(Deuteronomy 15:4)

In a land flowing with milk and honey, there would be no need for any man, woman or child to go to bed hungry or not have basic shelter.

That was then, but this is now. According to the United Nations, in 2010 there were 925 million hungry people. Here, hunger is defined as protein or vitamin and mineral malnutrition. 925 million malnourished people is one in every seven people who populate this planet. This figure continues to climb steadily even though our world is producing more food per head of population. The problem is not having enough food. The problem is that food reaching all who need it. Let's get back to the Bible.

Did you know there are more than 2000 verses in the Bible concerning the poor? 2000 verses! Viewed together, these scriptures demonstrates God's passion for the poor.

Some of God's commands seek to directly alleviate the effects of poverty. For example, farmers were commanded by God to leave the remnants of their crops for the poor to collect free of charge:

When you reap the harvest of your land, do not reap to the very edges of your field or gather the gleanings of your harvest. Do not go over your vineyard a second time or pick up the grapes that have fallen. Leave them for the poor and the foreigner. I am the LORD your God.

(Leviticus 19:9-10)

Similarly, God sought to legislate against, and dismantle those systems that were the root causes of poverty, like usury, or the charging of excessive interest:

If you lend money to one of my people among you who is needy, do not treat it like a business deal; charge no interest.

(Exodus 22:25)

Finally, when God saw his commandments to care for the poor, he let rip against Israel through the prophets. For example, read the Book of Amos and, I promise you, you will wince.

In Amos day, temple worship is elaborate but corrupted. The rich are getting fewer and richer and the poor are becoming many and poorer. Wealth had become the most dangerous and destructive of idols, replacing God as the object of peoples' worship. When this happens the poor become marginalized.

Where money is an idol, to be poor is a sin.

(William Stringfellow)

And so God speaks a word of withering judgment through Amos against Israel.

This is what the LORD says: "For three sins of Israel, even for four, I will not relent. They sell the innocent for silver, and the needy for a pair of sandals. They trample on the heads of the poor as on the dust of the ground and deny justice to the oppressed."

(Amos 2:6-7)

These are good, religious people who know how to worship God right. But this is what God says to good religious people who piously worship God and yet ignore the cry of the poor:

I hate, I despise your religious festivals; your assemblies are a stench to me....Away with the noise of your songs! I will not listen to the music of your harps. But let justice roll on like a river, righteousness like a never-failing stream!

(Amos 5:21, 23-24)

God is not interested in the eloquence of our prayers; he is passionate about the compassion evident in our lives.

God does not care if we sing hymns or Hillsong; he does care if we care for the poor.

God is good news for the poor because God has not and will never forget them. God is the eternal advocate for the poor and Jesus embodied this. Jesus spent the overwhelming majority of his three year ministry serving the rural poor of Galilee. He made a habit of spending a scandalous amount of time with the marginalized. Jesus did not seek out the corridors of power to launch his ministry. He sought out the poor. Jesus said:

Blessed are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

(Luke 6:20)

God is good news for the poor and Jesus proclaims that good news.

Jesus embodied God's compassion for the poor and he also commissioned God's people, his disciples, to serve the poor.

Jesus Commissioned God's People to serve the Poor

Jesus told a story about the end of time when Jesus returns in glory. Then he will separate the people gathered before him like a shepherd separates sheep and goats. The sheep will be on his right, the goats on the left.

Then the King will say to those on his right, 'Come, you who are blessed by my Father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world. For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in.
(Matthew 25:34-35)

In Jesus' story, those on the right, the sheep are confused. When did we feed you Jesus? When did we give you something to drink? When did we invite you in? The king replies:

Truly I tell you, whatever you did for one of the least of these brothers and sisters of mine, you did for me.
(Matthew 25:40)

Jesus gives us a pretty simple and stark picture. If we want to serve him we will serve the poor. I will go further; it seems evident to me that we cannot love God as we would want without loving and serving the poor.

I discovered this cartoon this week featuring two turtles:

One turtle says, "Sometimes I'd like to ask why he allows poverty, famine, and injustice when he could do something about it."

The other turtle says, "I'm afraid God might ask me the same question."

Jesus commissioned us, his body, his hands and his feet, to go and to serve and to bless the poor.

When we fail to serve and act generously towards the poor we effectively rob them.

One of the marks of the early church was their radical commitment to care for the poor and to challenge selfishness and greed inside and outside the church. This week I have been rocked by some amazing, compelling and disturbing words of some ancient church Fathers who challenged the church in their day fulfill Jesus' commission:

There is your brother, naked and crying! And you stand confused over the choice of an attractive floor covering.
(Saint Ambrose)

The bread you do not use is the bread of the hungry. The garment hanging in your wardrobe is the garment of the person who is naked. The shoes you do not wear are the shoes of the one who is barefoot. The money you keep locked away is the money of the poor.
(Basil the Great)

Feeding the hungry is a greater work than raising the dead.
(Saint John Chrysostom)

Finally, if Jesus commissioned us, you and me, his church, to serve the poor, how do we do it?

How do we serve the poor?

We serve the poor out of humble gratefulness and through radical generosity.

Gratefulness

We serve the poor out of a spirit of gratefulness. We spent all of last week reflecting on the many ways God has blessed us. No more are we materially blessed to live in this era in this nation. Our standard of living is unparalleled in human history.

In 1990, the United Nations developed a statistic to measure of the standard of living across the world. The measure is called the Human Development Index and it measures health, education and income.

In 2011, Australia had the second highest HDI score, behind only Norway. Darn those Scandinavians! Life expectancy in Australia is 81.9 years and income per head of population is \$34,431.

I thought I would do a couple of quick comparisons.

Stu and Jo Herschell-Adair work in Cambodia. Our young adult community had a mission trip there this year and will be sponsoring 26 slum-dwelling children through school. Cambodia ranks number 139 out of 187 nations on the HDI index. Life expectancy in Cambodia is 63.1 years and income per head of population is \$1848.

Then there is Sierra Leone, where Tahme worked. Sierra Leone is number 180 out of 187 on the HDI index. Life expectancy is 47.8 years, 34 years less than Australia. Income per head of population is \$737, which is 2% of what we earn here in Australia. 2%!

Folks, by any standard or statistic I could fling at you, we are rich.

To be born or immigrate to this country is to be truly blessed.

To be born at this time in this nation was not our choice. It was God's.

And if you immigrated here, that was your choice. But believe me when I say, your citizenship here was possible only through God's providential care.

When we fall to our knees in gratitude for the incredible material blessing God has showered us with then, and only then, will we be ready to serve the poor. Only grateful hearts can truly serve the poor, because grateful people know that every material blessing is a gift of God on loan to us. Grateful people hold material things lightly. Grateful people are generous people.

Generosity

We serve the poor through generosity. We serve a radically generous God who held nothing back in redeeming the world, and who in turn calls and inspires and empowers us to be radical in our generosity as his people. Proverbs says:

The generous will themselves be blessed, for they share their food with the poor.
(Proverbs 22:9)

We are about to enter a month of conspicuous consumption. Australians will spend \$23 billion on Christmas. To give some context; the entire GDP of Sierra Leone in 2010 was \$1.9 billion. We will spend 10 times more than the entire yearly income of Sierra Leone on jocks, socks, toys, gift vouchers, Christmas hams and trinkets.

This may come as a surprise, but we do not serve the poor by consuming more, but by giving more.

So I am proposing our own Newlife Jubilee. This Christmas let's give our credit cards a break. Let's mark this Christmas not with conspicuous consumption, but with radical generosity.

There are so many worthy recipients for our God-inspired generosity - World Vision, UnitingWorld, Compassion. This week we will compile a list of links that we will post on the website and send out through E-News to make it easier to give. Of course there is our Christmas Tree project. Every one of the projects represented on the Cards serves the poor.

For example, this week with your newsletter you received an update from John and Elin Morris who are two of our Acts 1:8 missionaries who serve with YWAM. John is an amazing young man. Moved by the plight of the poor and inspired by God, John has started a clean water charity called Justice Water. Nearly 1 billion people do not have access to clean water and so hundreds of millions die of preventable diseases. Last year John's teams completed 12 clean water projects in places like Togo, Africa and Haiti. Through those 12 projects, 3000 people now have access to clean water. Praise God. Your support for John and Elin serves the poor.

In the Old Testament God announced a Jubilee with the sound of the Trumpet on the Day of Atonement.

In the New Testament God announced Jubilee when Jesus stood in the synagogue in Nazareth and read from the prophet Isaiah.

Today, God announces Jubilee – good news for the poor, release for the captive, recovery of sight for the blind and liberation for the oppressed – through us, through the church, through the Body of Christ. Our world needs to hear Jubilee – that God has not given up on this world and that everything in this world that is sad will one day become untrue.