

17 December 2023

Isaiah 61:1-4, 8-11
1 Thessalonians 5:16-24
John 1:6-8, 19-28

I have a photo, taken almost 30 years ago, in which I am standing with my young son at a crossroads, in rural north Waikato. We stand beside a signpost, under a sign that points to Goodin Road.

When I was a child the road had been called “Reed No. 2 Road”, there being four Reed Roads in the district. A renaming project was undertaken in the mid-70s, and Reed No. 2 Road was re-named Goodin Road, given that it formed one boundary of my parent’s farm. This farm had been farmed by my parents since they married, and before that had belonged to my mother’s father, and his father before him. My great-grandfather had been one of the original Pakeha settlers in this valley, back in 1866. Of course all the land settled in the area was land that had been confiscated from Maori in punishment for their supposed rebellion. About 120 years later New Zealand's Parliament heard how:

... the confiscations were unjust, and ... Waikato-Tainui, far from being in rebellion, were in fact defending hearth and home ... The Waikato war and the confiscations that followed caused devastation ... The people were dispersed, and there was widespread suffering, distress and deprivation ... The land of their ancestors had been taken from them with the stroke of a pen.¹

“Signposts” seems to be a good theme for today.

In the reading from the first chapter of John’s Gospel, John the Baptist is introduced in his key role as a witness to Jesus. John is a witness who testifies, who bears witness, to the good news of Jesus Christ. The Greek words for witness and testify appear more than forty-five times in John's Gospel: a central theme of that book is the whole issue of who is a witness, and what testimony they give. These ideas have their origin in the law courts

¹ <http://www.nzhistory.net.nz/politics/treaty/the-treaty-in-practice/waikato-tainui>

and, so, imply public testimony to something that one guarantees is absolutely true.²

John the Baptist resolutely points to Jesus: he is not in this for himself, he is merely the humble signpost pointing to the greater one.

John the Baptist is the signpost pointing to Jesus.

Jesus himself points both backwards and forwards.

Our readings today don't directly teach us much about Jesus, but you may have heard an echo of Jesus in the Isaiah passage. That's because Jesus quoted and adapted that Isaiah passage when he spoke in the synagogue in Nazareth, as we read in Luke 4:16-21. After reading from the scroll of Isaiah, he said, 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

This is Jesus' own testimony about himself. He points backwards, picking up the ancient hopes, and saying, "These hopes are fulfilled in me."

It is thought likely that the idea of the language of the "year of the Lord's favour" draws on the idea of the year of Jubilee. The year of Jubilee was prescribed in Leviticus. As part of the covenant established at Mount Sinai, the Jewish people were commanded to observe Sabbath years. Every seventh year the land was not to be sown, and vines were not to be pruned. After seven Sabbath years had been observed, after 49 years, a fiftieth year was to be observed as a year of Jubilee. In the Jubilee year any land that had been sold was to be restored to its previous owner. If someone had been sold into slavery in payment of a debt, they were to be freed. Debts were to be written off.

Now to us, so familiar with the patterns and incentives of western capitalism, this policy seems a bit weird. It seems to create perverse incentives, protecting people from the proper and deserved consequences of their actions.

² Powell

And I wonder, how does the idea of land being restored to its previous owner play against my family's history on that piece of land in Waikato?

But the Jubilee year is a signpost of something significant about God and his people: God is the Creator, and everything has its source in him – land, people, nation are all ultimately God's possessions.

And in the year of Jubilee God claims it all back – alienated land is returned to God, and then is given by God to those he gave it too originally; and enslaved individuals are given to God to be freed.

Now, there is in fact scant evidence that the year of Jubilee was actually observed in practice. So why does Jesus draw on this Isaiah passage, why does he point to this idea of Jubilee?

We mustn't make the mistake of taking him metaphorically, as if he were talking about a merely personal spiritual reality. It is clear that indebtedness was major issue in first century Palestine: the first thing the rebels did at the start of the Jewish War in AD66 was to burn down the treasury where the records of debt were kept. But it is unlikely that Jesus was calling all Israel to celebrate the Jubilee: this does not seem to correspond with his agenda anywhere else.³

But what does seem a bit more likely is that Jesus was calling his people to form groups or gatherings who might, among other things, live by the Jubilee principle among themselves. In the Matthew version of the Lord's Prayer the petition reads, literally, "forgive us our debts as we forgive those who are in debt to us". While it is true that "debts" was an Aramaic idiom for sins, to forgive actual debts is consistent with forgiveness of other wrongs. And sacrificial acts of charity came to be one of the hallmarks of the early church community (as we read for example in Acts 4).

³ This section draws on Wright, *Jesus and the Victory of God*, pp.294-5

In living this way, the people of Jesus were to demonstrate their belief that the kingdom of God was indeed dawning. Those who followed Jesus were to live 'as if' the Jubilee was being enacted. They were to be the new returned-from-exile people, and this had implications for how they lived with one another as well as what they believed.

Ultimately, Jubilee was about restoration of fortunes; it is about a great reversal of the effects of an individual's ineptitude or misfortune.

It doesn't come out of what those individuals deserve; it comes out of who God is, and who the people are in relation to God. This is made clear in the passage that gives us the Jubilee command. Throughout Leviticus 25 the details of the Jubilee command are related to God's character and relationship with the nation, and in particular to God's deliverance of the Israelites from slavery in Egypt and their arrival in the Promised Land – a complete turn-around in their fortunes.

It is just such a great reversal – in fact an even greater reversal – that God offers to his people in Isaiah 61. To his oppressed, broken-hearted, struggling people, God announces liberation and restoration. It is not a literal year of Jubilee, but it has that same character of a radical change of fortunes.

As the centuries rolled on, this Isaiah passage became part of the expectation associated with the Messiah. The Messiah would come to save, to liberate the people, to restore Jerusalem as the city of God, to establish God's reign of justice and peace. When Jesus adopted this passage for himself, he was pointing to himself as the Messiah, the one ushering in God's kingly rule.

"Today this passage has become fulfilled in your own hearing," said Jesus. The great reversal has come, is coming, and is occurring now.

It *has come* in Christ's reversal of the fall – as a result of Jesus' life, death, and resurrection all creation is able to be restored into wholeness and right relationship with the Creator.

It *is coming* in Christ's return when he will judge all, and reign over all.

And it *is occurring already* whenever we, members of Christ's body, subvert structures and attitudes which are not of God:

- When we gather as equals around the Lord's table, rather than offering hospitality only to those who are like us or who have something we want;
- When we seek justice for the weak, poor, marginalised, oppressed;
- When we refuse to despair, but rather are voices of hope;
- When we forgive those who wrong us and seek their wellbeing, not because they deserve it but because we are people of the God who has forgiven us.

Like John the Baptist, the church is sent into today's world as a witness, as a signpost. A signpost is public, certain, and humble.

These qualities are in tension with the spirit of our age. Most people today regard religion as a private matter and do not want to hear about someone else's particular beliefs. Certainty is also shunned in these postmodern times; we are all victims of our own perspectives: who can ever know for sure whether anything is true or not?

Still, we are bold enough to believe that the gospel is true, and that it must be proclaimed boldly -- publicly and confidently.

The trick is to bear witness to this truth with humility. For John that meant acting as a signpost, directing people away from himself and toward Jesus. Notice how people try not to let him do that. "Who are *you*? What do you say about *yourself*?" they ask in John 1:22.⁴

We are called to point to Jesus. We are called to point to where we see Jesus' kingdom activity already happening among us.

But we need too to remember that it is not enough to point, it is not enough to just offer testimony to what we observe. The integrity of the signpost matters. A signpost that is rotted through so that it is leaning over doesn't inspire confidence that it is pointing the right way, or that what it appears to be pointing to might be there anymore. A signpost that is swiveling in the wind doesn't have credibility.

⁴ Drawn from Lewis.

The testimony of our lives – reflecting what we truly believe in, reflecting it in action – counts for a great deal. Yes, we need the pointing of words; but we also need the testimony of who we are and what we are doing as the people of God.

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