



Tearfund/Jacqui J. Sze

Read the Archbishop's sermon at the Tearfund 50th anniversary service at Coventry Cathedral today.

Isaiah 61:1

'The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,

because the Lord has anointed me;

he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,

to bind up the brokenhearted,

to proclaim liberty to the captives,

and release to the prisoners'

Aid agencies and NGOs are going through a torrid time. There are so many bits of news that speak about the difficulties and failures of transformation. We hear of the news of staff that fail, of governments that steal, of wars that destroy, of power seeking that disregards the poor.

And so it is no surprise that this passage from Isaiah 61 appears sometimes to be at best utopian, and often mere building of castles in the air. "They may be fine castles," says the cynic, "they may depict a world we could dream of," but the pragmatist, the critic of aid spending, says, "No, concentrate on here, on us, on me, on our needs, on the struggles of my community at home, for we cannot change what happens elsewhere."

So equally were some of the comments of those who heard the words of Isaiah 61 for the first time in the slave labour camps of Babylon, or the second time in their greatest proclamation in Jesus' mouth in Luke 4, for in the opening declaration of his ministry, he was clearly proclaiming the Year of Jubilee. You can hear his listeners thinking, and in fact Luke goes on to expand their thoughts, "Who's this anyway? What right? Do shut up! It's all very well, but look at the realities." For there is nothing new about the real day to day struggles of everyone's lives obscuring the long term, or the real local needs overwhelming the cries of the distant poor. It is a conundrum that is as old as time. Yet its great fault is that it leaves God out of the equation.

Tearfund works, has worked and will work on the basis of putting God back into the calculation, on the basis of what God calls us to do in Scripture, properly interpreted, for Tearfund calls us to the response that amplifies the distant voices and takes all human beings to a different level of relationship in which those distant voices are heard clearly in our ears.

Isaiah 61 was taken up by Jesus at the very start of his ministry and we are here to celebrate that through 50 years, you have lived it. In what you do, you demonstrate that the reductionist and rationalist materialism which inserts the measure of distance and familiarity into the calculation of benefit and says that the far away and unfamiliar don't count for much, that calculation that sees the world in terms of exchange and scarcity, leads to disaster. By contrast God restores relationships and opens the way to the infinitely greater realities of a new creation. And I am so

pleased that we are here in this Cathedral for its very stones speak of that good news of God's recalculation of our miscalculations.

But in practice, all of you involved in Tearfund, all of us, know that that recalculation in practice means hard, discouraging and dangerous work. It means doing a million small things that, together, usher in the kingdom of God. When out there that Cathedral burned, and you look at the photos of the next day, the rubble is feet high above people's reach. The smoke is rising, hundreds are dead, thousands are injured and tens of thousands homeless. Where did they start? They began to clear the rubble one piece at a time. They picked up nails that had fallen from the burning beams and to remind themselves what hope was, they made crosses from them. The great altar cross, which the screen hides, is shaped in the twisted wood that had fallen burning from the roof and in the middle are some medieval nails that had fallen from that wood in the shape of the cross.

They imagined the new.

Basil Spence, the architect here, was caught in a fox hole under fire in the Second World War after the Normandy landings, and the person sharing his foxhole said, words to the effect of, "If we survive this, what will you do after the war?" And Basil Spence said, "I will build a cathedral." Well that was a bit brave. There hadn't been one built since the 17th Century. And he tells how he came here and he stood in those ruins when the competition for the design started and the image of what we now see, more or less with small variations, just dropped in to his mind.

Clearing the rubble, imagining the new with the gift of the Spirit of God, building it stone by stone, piece by piece, glass window by glass window.

How do we do that? "Oh yes, we are not going to give up," says Emmanuel, "until poverty is abolished." And the cynic whose voice I took in the early bits of this address says, "Oh yeah, great, that's a lifetime's occupation, and your grandchildren's too!"

How do we do it? It always begins, as Tearfund knows so well, with our relationship with God. Reconciliation of relationships with God is not an add on that is useful in faith based organisations; it is the only source of life, energy and vision. On this tapestry, at its base, is Jesus on the cross. It's one piece of cloth, there are no divisions, no joins, this is all one. Above is this enormous picture of the glorified Christ from the book of Revelation and between Jesus' feet is a human person. Actually, when you get up close, the person is about as big as most people here.

This person can't see Jesus but this person is looking out into the world around and is overshadowed by the glorified Christ. Perhaps that is where Tearfund is, at the feet of Jesus, with glory above, and the cross as the foundation. The fulfilment of Isaiah 61 is primarily and cannot be without us being the people of God, the people who bear the imprint of his Spirit meaning that whoever we are, whatever resources we have, whatever power we have or none whatsoever, we each are part of God's action in the world, which incidentally is why having Gospability singing is so important.

And the clearing of the rubble, the building of our new world continues with recognising that relationship with God draws us into relationship

with all God's people. It means that the smallest and the least in the eyes of the world, those whom we see as needing our help, those who might be dismissed and invisible, in the power of the Spirit, are part of God's action. This is how Tearfund works: in partnership with local Christians and local churches.

On your website I was struck by the images of Ogongora Village, in Uganda, where, together with the local community and their churches, a number of initiatives are transforming the life of the village. There is a grinding machine to enable villagers to grind their own crops into flour; a bull and plough bought for the community, so that more land can be planted; a building for the church infant school, so that children from poorer families may be educated; a medical clinic, to give pregnant women and children suffering from malaria better local care; a borehole so that clean water is accessible to all without a long walk. This is a community together for the community. It is the Gospel in action. Please do go and browse the website – it is inspiring, challenging and incredibly moving.

So we begin with our restored relationship with God, we continue with our relationship with all others who are part of his family, as partners not objects of do-goodery, as equally valued, and we end by being those who overflow with the gift of liberation to a world enslaved and that is true jubilee. The year of Jubilee was the 49th year when all land returns to its original owners, when all debts are wiped, when the slate is wiped clean and an entire nation has got the chance to start again.

Jubilee was about the entire nation, but in Jesus' mouth, it becomes about the entire world. The Spirit of God is upon me and it is in the power of the Spirit that we bring jubilee to the whole world, indeed in Romans 8 to the entire creation.

Jubilee acknowledges that things go wrong. The very fact that Jubilee is needed, is because even when we reboot the system and try again, human beings fail to deal justly, equally and fairly. Jubilee therefore goes hand in hand with repentance. Again the Cathedral speaks to that. It was the architect's vision that every time you looked out of the glories of the West screen, you saw the ruins and the reminder of sin. But you looked through those crazy angels who are dancing and you see the prophets and kings who called them to that dance. Tearfund, like each of us and all together, must remember that daily repentance is a foundation of restoration, even for those seeking to do good. In repenting we proclaim liberation from guilt, for what other point is there?

Jubilee therefore is about freedom and release. It is freedom for all captives whether to the sinful structures of slavery, of debt, poverty and injustice. But remember in this country, let us remember in this congregation here, that action to release the poor also releases those captive to wealth, to power, to their own want and need for money and security. Jubilee blesses all. It can as easily transform the powerful and rich as the weak and poor. Of course, one problem is that the rich and powerful do not always, or even often, welcome liberation from their golden chains.

Tearfund, we ask you, please go on enabling us to recognise and embrace the vaulting ambitions of this vision that Jesus gives us. The French

philosopher and Christian, Paul Ricoeur, wrote of two visions of the world. One is exchange and equivalence, the other is abundance and grace.

The economy of exchange and equivalence tells us that there simply aren't enough resources for all of us to share; that we have to struggle for land, for power. There isn't enough talent, there aren't enough gifts for all to thrive; striving for justice and equality is naïve. That lie dominates our societies. In contrast, the economy of abundance and grace is the economy of God. It is the economy set up in Genesis with the wild excesses of creation - who needs all those stars? Yet the nature of God is shown in his infinite surplus of creation. It is an economy that seeks the common good, not individual advancement or utility.

That is why we celebrate the gift of Tearfund to church and to world. You bring gifts and inspiration, you go on proclaiming the year of Jubilee. You transform our vision of God, of his creation, of the restoration of all things in right and just relationships. May God grant you the next 50 years with resources and vision to match the last.

9 min read

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