

Isaiah 61:1-3

1 The Spirit of the Sovereign LORD is on me, because the LORD has anointed me to preach 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,

2 to proclaim the year of the LORD's favor 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 gladness instead of mourning, and a garment of praise instead of a spirit of despair. They will be called oaks of righteousness, a planting of the LORD for the display of his splendor.

Mark 10:35-45

35 Then James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher," they said, "we want you to do for us whatever we ask."

36 "What do you want me to do for you?" he asked.

37 They replied, "Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory."

38 "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. "Can you drink the cup I drink or be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with?"

39 "We can," they answered. Jesus said to them, "You will drink the cup I drink and be baptized with the baptism I am baptized with,

40 but to sit at my right or left is not for me to grant. These places belong to those for whom they have been prepared."

41 When the ten heard about this, they became indignant with James and John.

42 Jesus called them together and said, "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them.

43 Not so with you. Instead, whoever wants to become great among you must be your servant,

44 and whoever wants to be first must be slave of all.

45 For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many."

Today we begin to explore the hymn line 'Ransom'd, healed, restored, forgiven'. The first of those words is: RANSOMED. However varied the different books of the bible may be, however different their various authors, writing in different centuries and even different millennia, a single story runs through scripture from start to finish. One way to sum it up is through the theme of captivity and freedom.

At a turning point in the story, Jesus stands up in the synagogue and reads from Isaiah chapter 61, in which a servant of God announces his ministry of liberation. The language looks back to the event of the Exodus, in which God led his people out of slavery in Egypt and into the freedom of the Promised Land. It also looks forward; the same words from Isaiah anticipate what Jesus will accomplish upon the cross. Two of the gospels record how the disciples squabbled among themselves as to which of them was the greatest; to which Jesus replied that He – and they – were servants, not masters. So, He said to them, "For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many." *Ransom* is the word in my mind today – it opens up further the theme of release from captivity leading to freedom or, if you like, to liberation.

This Holy Week I'm inviting you to explore with me the 3rd line of Francis Henry Lyte's hymn 'Praise my soul the king of heaven', a line that proclaims that in Christ we are 'ransom's, healed, restored, forgiven'. So if Jesus' ministry of liberation points on to the church as, at least in its best moments, a community of liberation, what ought that to look like in individual Christian lives? Too big a subject to unpack in just 3 minutes today, but let me end by quoting from Matthew Parris, a columnist in *The Times*. Listen to his experiences of Christianity in Africa, where he has spent many years:

"Now a confirmed atheist, I've become convinced of the enormous contribution that Christian evangelism makes in Africa ... In Africa Christianity changes people's hearts. It brings a spiritual transformation. The rebirth is real. The change is good ... In the city we had working for us Africans who had converted and were strong believers. The Christians were always different. Far from having cowed or confined its converts, their faith appeared to have liberated and relaxed them. There was a liveliness, a curiosity, an engagement with the world - a directness in their dealings with others - that seemed to be missing in traditional African life. They stood tall."

Ah, I like that: 'They stood tall'. That is what people ought to be seeing in Christians today, and not just in Africa.