



Sermon

Year of God's Favour

Isaiah 61:1-2

14/12/2014

© 2014 The Revd Ian Hardcastle

In January, about twenty of us went to the New Wine Conference in Warkworth. One of the speakers was Andrea Wigglesworth from St Mungo's Church, Edinburgh. She came with the message that God was saying to her, "This is a year of my favour for New Zealand."

She urged us to position ourselves to receive God's favour. She believed God wanted to pour out his favour on the land, the people, churches, lives.... I thought it probably related to the Bicentenary this Christmas.

Then I went to a seminar addressed by Bill Johnson in August. He happened to comment, "Wherever I go around the world people are saying this is a year of favour." So it was not just a message from one preacher; nor for one country.

Andrea suggested what God's favour might look like:

1. Increased influence in your work, your church or wherever your activities are.
2. A time of turnarounds. Some things in life just get stuck. God's favour may be seen in supernatural or extraordinary turnarounds when those things start working as we would wish but daren't even hope for.
3. God's favour may be seen in dreams reawakened, limitations broken, hope restored.
4. It may be seen in doors opening to new opportunities.

Looking back, I now recognize that the new Evening Service was such a door opening. Helen and I had wanted to start an evening service since we came but had neither the musicians nor the energy to produce another teaching each Sunday. Suddenly, soon after New Wine, a door opened - we had the motivation, the musicians and the means. There, in that open door, we saw limitations broken and a dream reawakened – we saw His favour expressed.

As we went into this year, Jan Watson kept the idea before me. She kept reminding me that we needed to take the opportunity of this favour. As the ideas of an extra staff member and alternate shop premises developed and were pursued, we increasingly hoped and started to believe we were seeing God's favour extended.

It gets more exciting yet. You know how you gave the Vestry a commission to employ an extra staff member at the AGM. With the work done of drawing up a job description, some said, "How are we going to raise the money?" I said, "We don't. The AGM agreed to a motion saying they would fund it, so we take it back to

them.” We had the Pledge Day and you pledged the necessary extra funding to allow us to go ahead. That was wonderful and while all credit goes to each who pledged, is it not another mark of God’s favour? By the way, I don’t want to be heavy about this, but from the total figures the treasurer reports, some people have not matched their giving to their pledge. We have employed Tony and we do need that income you have promised.

Tony was appointed and as we got to know each other there was a startling discovery. From my point of view I started praying for an assistant in January 2012 (at a previous New Wine – they really are good value – have you booked to go this January?) From his standpoint, he saw our website about the same time from England and started praying that he would be able to work for that Church! After 2½ years, both our prayers were answered. Might that be an expression of God’s favour?

Meanwhile a subcommittee of Vestry worked diligently to find better premises for the Op Shop. We considered every available (and quite a few not yet available shops) around here. There was one shop Jan spotted which looked very attractive although substantially larger than the old shop. Her attention was caught by the agent’s sign: “Position yourself here.” It resonated with Andrea saying “Position yourself to receive God’s favour.” Well the shop was about twice as large as we were aiming for and far more expensive and then it turned out it was not available anyway. Yet, no other shop was suitable.

Then Jan heard that shop had become available - she negotiated a rent we were able to agree to. We moved in and the shop took off! Stock has poured in, helpers have volunteered and sales have escalated. A door opened, the limitation broke, there was a dramatic turnaround - we were seeing God’s favour at work in our midst.

Was that it for the favour of 2014? A revelation came. I was at a Pastors’ prayer meeting when someone mentioned that we have just entered the Jewish Sabbatical Year. That excited me. Let me explain.

In the Old Testament law, as you know there was the provision of the Sabbath. Work six days and then a day of rest. There was also a Sabbath year:

Leviticus 25:2-4 "When you have entered the land I am giving you, the land itself must observe a Sabbath rest before the LORD every seventh year. For six years you may plant your fields and prune your vineyards and harvest your crops, but during the seventh year the land must have a Sabbath year of complete rest. It is the LORD's Sabbath. (New Living Bible)

There was to be agricultural rest. How would they live? God answers that later in the chapter promising a bonus harvest in the sixth year to carry them through the fallow year.¹ It was also commanded that debts were to be forgiven and slaves released.

Deuteronomy 15:1 "At the end of every seventh year you must cancel the debts of everyone who owes you money ... for the LORD's time of release has arrived."

Deuteronomy 15:12 "If a fellow Hebrew sells himself or herself to be your servant and serves you for six years, in the seventh year you must set that servant free."

The Sabbatical year was a year of release: Debts were forgiven, slaves freed and there was rest from labour. Everyone was allowed to take the crops which grew naturally that year.

In the Jubilee Year, the fiftieth year, the same conditions applied with the addition that land was to be restored to the original family allocation.

So I heard from the other pastor that in September it was the Jewish New Year, and they entered a Sabbatical year – a year when debts are to be released, slaves freed and there is rest from agricultural work.

¹ Leviticus 25:20

When I checked the day of the Jewish New Year, it started on September 24th. The contract for the shop was signed that day. Tony was appointed when I got back in early October. Maybe 2014 was a year of preparation for the Year of Favour to come?

Later that day, I was still thinking about it and I prayed about what significance that might have for Christians. The Law specially relates to Jews in Israel. Immediately, there came to mind Jesus' words from Luke 4, when he read from Isaiah 61, the beginning of today's Old Testament lesson.

Luke 4:18-21 "The Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind, to release the oppressed, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour." 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, and he began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

It is clear that the Isaiah passage harks back to the Sabbatical and Jubilee years. The Messiah will usher in the fulfillment of that release. When we realize the connection, it is apparent that references to the poor, the oppressed and prisoners match up to debt and slavery. The words "release" and "favour" are the key words used about these years.

So if this concept needs Christian expression, it calls us to Jesus' commission: Preach good news to the poor; proclaim freedom to the prisoners; sight to the blind; release the oppressed. And Jesus said, "As the Father has sent me so I am sending you."²

It talks about being sent with a purpose, a commission. These ideas are laden with meaning. I did word studies on each of them in the Hebrew and the Greek versions. There are spiritual meanings and physical meanings. We are all somewhere in the range of need.

The poor are poor, needy, oppressed or afflicted. They are those who have the right to glean – that is take the remnant of the harvest and, of course, what grows in the Sabbatical Year. They are those dependent on others for support. They might be dependent on family help or a benefit. They may be oppressed by high interest loans.

Jesus has good news. The Sabbatical year was good news as debt is cancelled. We already have a small involvement with Christians Against Poverty, it has obvious application in this area. CAP has recently announced a Job Club idea, which we could run to help people find work and encourage them on the way to employment. We are considering that for the New Year.

Captives may be literal – slaves to be set free - or it may apply to moral and spiritual bondage. We all have some level of spiritual restraint and we are surrounded by those in addictions of many types. The majority of the population lacks spiritual freedom.

Jesus had the commission to release the oppressed and gives it to the Church. That word "release" includes debt cancellation, pardon and the forgiveness of sins. Not just the hiding of sin - when God forgives us in Christ he removes our sin from his thinking.

I think God has expressed his favour to us and is taking us up another step in our ministry as a parish. It is the desire of the Vestry and of Lyn Walker, our Shop Manager, that the Shop become a means of outreach to the community. That will take time to develop. First we need to get it steadied in its new form and level of activity. But maybe Jesus' commission gives us markers for what could happen through the shop as well as the church here. Maybe it is to find ways to tell good news to the poor; to bring release to those in spiritual bondage; to bring financial freedom and control to those who are in debt; to walk beside the oppressed and the blind as we lift their eyes to the possibilities God has for them.

² John 20:21

Is it coincidence that the shop contract was signed then, that Tony started inside that year? Is it coincidence that we started the conference in Kondo on 24th September. I saw more recovery of sight for the blind there than I have previously – interesting?

I wonder if we are just beginning to expand into this favour. What might we see in terms of lives changed and souls won? It will demand much of us, but the results will be exciting and worthwhile.

Church, regardless of this being a Sabbatical year, Jesus' manifesto applies to us. It requires us to trust the sovereignty of God, to expect his provision, to allow him to set us free, to experience his atonement, to practise his justice and to hope in his promises.

His commission includes our evangelistic mission, personal and social ethics and our future hope. Thank God for his favour!