# Isaiah 61

Isaiah 61 is a testimony. It is “fulfilled” in Jesus’ ministry (see Luke 4:16-21) and people often see it as a warrant for ministry to the poor and oppressed. But NT “fulfillment” frequently refers to a *reapplication* of OT passages (cf. Matt 2:13-18). So the application of the passage by Jesus to himself may not tell us what God originally meant. We discover that by looking at it in its own right.

Considered thus, it is not in the narrow sense a prophecy, a message relating what is going to happen “in the latter days” (contrast, for instance, Isa 11). It is the prophet’s own testimony, telling us what the prophetic calling was. Nearly all the words and phrases in the chapter are picked up from passages in Isaiah 40—55, particularly the servant passages there. The person anointed by God to proclaim God’s message is thus either the same person as the one who gives the testimony in 40:6; 49:1-6; and 50:4-9, or (more likely) is someone aware of being called to a similar role in later decades.

The speaker’s task, then, is to declare that the moment when Yahweh restores Israel is certainly coming. It is so certain that it can be said to be here. Verses 1-3 encourage the hearers by describing in various lyrically poetic ways the transformation this will bring.

(a) The hearers are like the “afflicted” in the psalms; God promises to take their side and act on their behalf. “Afflicted” is a relational term, denoting people who are powerless and underprivileged in relation to others who are in a position to dominate them. In describing themselves as the “afflicted” or “downtrodden” they express their conviction that they have a special claim on God’s aid.

(b) They are like slaves; God promises to “proclaim a release” as was supposed to happen in the jubilee year (see Leviticus 25; Jeremiah 34).

(c) They are like people exiled by their enemies; God promises to defeat these enemies. (The “year of favor” and the “day of vengeance” are the same thing; cf. GNB).

(d) They are like people depressed and mourning; God replaces their grief by joy like that of a wedding, and their depression by the enthusiastic praise of the righteous glorifying God.

Verses 4-7 continue to describe a total transformation, but in more prosaic terms. The devastated city will be rebuilt (v. 4 is best taken impersonally, “ancient cities will be rebuilt”[NEB]). The once-victorious foreigners will now serve the Judahites. The Judahites will all comprise a privileged class. Their needs will be met by the nations, and their shame will be replaced by honor (vv. 5-7 may imply that the nations benefit from Israel’s priestly ministry, but their emphasis is on the glory and privilege Israel itself enjoys through its special position).

Verses 8-9 offer the reason for this transformation. Yahweh disapproves of the oppression of Israel’s enemies. He reiterates the promise to Abraham for Israel described in Genesis 12:1-3.

Verses 10-11 are a response to the proclamation of vv. 1-9 (compare especially v. 3). Verse 10 praises God for that proclamation (even though the transformation itself is not yet experienced, except as a promise from God), while verse 11 expresses faith that it will come true. The “I” may therefore now be the believing community to which the proclamation is given—or perhaps the prophet now speaks as the community’s representative and offers its response to God.

What about the modern applications of the passage?

(a) The speaker is called only to speak, to declare what God is going to do. Neither prophet nor audience are told to do anything themselves. Even verse 3 refers to the consequences of this preaching.

(b) Like many prophecies, this passage implies God is about to bring about the ultimate act of restoration and renewal. Such prophecies characteristically find only incomplete fulfillment in their own day. The prophets then challenge their hearers to a life of trust (that the ultimate act of restoration and renewal will come) and obedience (which establishes them as the sort of people for whom it comes). But because the prophecies point to the ultimate event, they can find other partial fulfillments in other events in which that ultimate event is anticipated—supremely, in Christ’s ministry, but also in ministry in the Spirit in general.

(c) Like other such promises and challenges, they are addressed to the people of God. Any wider application to the afflicted in general has to be argued for on grounds wider than this passage offers.