



## Sermon: - 11<sup>th</sup> December 2016

### Upside down kingdom

*Isaiah 35: 1 - 10; Luke 1: 46 – 56*

This morning I'm going to begin with a guessing game. I've got some photos of various things and I want to know what all these things got in common? Jeans, a suntan, brown bread! (Any ideas from anyone?) They originally belonged to the poor but they have been taken over by the rich.

Jeans were originally clothes for the working man, hard wearing and cheap. And then they became fashionable. Adopted by the young and the fashion conscious and now you can pay hundreds of pounds for a pair of designer jeans.

Centuries ago it was fashionable to have pale skin, sometimes I wish I had lived centuries ago, although to be honest not when I wake up on cold winter mornings in a centrally heated house! To be brown was an indication that you had to work in the fields for a living; it was often a sign that you were poor. Then after the Industrial Revolution, when more and more people were working indoors, a suntan became a sign that you had the leisure to sit outside in the sun, and only the wealthy had the leisure time to do that.

White bread used to be only for the wealthy and the poor ate brown bread because it was made with unrefined flour which was cheaper. The same would go for sugar – white, refined sugar was more expensive. But now, brown bread and brown sugar are more expensive than white and more likely to be eaten by the well-off.

There is one other that I want to add to this list of things that the rich have taken from the poor:

The Church. As Isaiah says, when the kingdom of God comes, then will the eyes of the blind be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped. Then will the lame leap like a deer, and the mute tongue shout for joy. And as Mary reminds us, he comes to bring down rulers from their thrones and to lift up the humble. He will fill the hungry with good things but send the rich away empty. Jesus came to be the champion of the poor, the weak, the folk that society didn't want to have anything to do with. The Magi got it wrong when they looked for him in a palace – he is a King, but his is an upside down kingdom. He didn't come to, or for, the rich and powerful. He came to bring peace, and love, and joy, to the poor.

Throughout his ministry Jesus made a habit of seeking out the company of those who were ostracised from society. He spent his time the company of tax collectors, who in those days were shunned because they kept so much of the money for themselves. He was not ashamed to be seen in the company of women. He embraced the leper and welcomed children. This picture of Jesus and his ministry is a familiar one, but the signs of this upside down kingdom were there from the moment of his conception.

The angel came to Mary, a young girl of no account, growing up in a village, which was a little backwater, in a little country, hidden away in a little corner of the vast Roman Empire. To this young girl God entrusted the care and nurture of his only begotten son.

Then when the message of the birth of Jesus was first announced it wasn't given to the rich and powerful, or to the rulers, political or religious, of the day, which we might have expected, it was given to the shepherds in the fields. Shepherds were also of no account in biblical times. They weren't quite as poorly regarded as tax collectors but notwithstanding the positive images we have, for example David was a shepherd boy, they weren't generally well thought of. In Genesis 46:34 they are called loathsome. In fact, being a shepherd was considered punishment. Numbers 14:33 says, "And your sons shall be shepherds for forty years in the wilderness, and they shall suffer for your unfaithfulness, until your corpses lie in the wilderness." They were abhorrent to faithful Jews who tried to follow the religious rules of the day. Shepherds couldn't keep the details of the ceremonial law; they could not observe all the meticulous hand washings and rules and regulations; their flocks made far too constant demands on them. And so they were looked down upon by the religious people, and the religious leaders, of the day. And it was to these people, despised by many, to whom God sent the first news of the birth of his son, that momentous event after which nothing, nothing would ever be the same again.

It was to these people, the poor, the ostracised, those on the margins of society, that Jesus came first. The Church is for the outsider. Church for the disreputable? Church for those shunned by society? Church for the weak, the poor, the sinful? Is that the church we know today? Whatever happened?

Perhaps we should blame the Emperor Constantine, after all, it was when he became a Christian in the 4th century that it became the official religion of the Roman Empire and its spread over the whole world really began to take off. But then, we really should give him credit for spreading the good news, not complaining about him making it fashionable.

Perhaps we should blame the bishops. Not only did they create an organisation out of Christianity which was probably necessary as its numbers grew, but they began to accrue wealth and lands to the Church. I think probably to begin with it was so that wealth could be redistributed to the poor, which was of course the right thing to do, as the Apostle Paul tells us, but church leaders began to accumulate it for themselves. During the Renaissance, several of the popes led lives of greed and corruption. Certainly the reformers in the 17th century thought that the Church leaders were corrupt or there would have been no reformation, but are the bishops to blame for the Church becoming so respectable that there is no room for sinners?

Perhaps we should blame the enlightenment. In the 18th century, the age of reason, the Church had to fight hard to survive. We were accused of being irrational, superstitious. We did a good job in reinventing ourselves at that point. Theology, which is the study of God and faith, became an accepted subject for study in the Universities alongside Law, Medicine and the sciences. And as a result Christianity's role as a religion for the rich, the

clever, the powerful was confirmed. To be a respected member of society, you had also to be a committed member of the church. What had happened to this upside down kingdom that Jesus came to inaugurate?

But then in the 1950s theologians began to recover a more biblical view of what the Church should be. Gustavo Gutierrez, a Roman Catholic priest and theologian from Peru, read passages such as the ones that we are considering this morning, and realised that Christianity wasn't a faith for the rich and powerful, but was a faith to save those who otherwise had no hope. Churches, he said, should be a haven, a hospice, a help for those who had no resources and nowhere to turn. Christianity should liberate the poor, not oppress them further as it had, certainly in Latin America where Gutierrez lived, but also elsewhere. The message of the Upside-down Kingdom began to be spread again. So perhaps instead of looking for someone to blame for the church departing from its original purpose, we should ask instead, how can we best fulfil this purpose today?

What does it mean for us here in Lennoxton, and our mission to our village? Our contact with the community? These are the questions we have begun to address and which we will continue to consider in the future. Jesus came to the poor, the captive, the broken-hearted. And that is good news for Lennoxton, for our community as we discover the needs, the problems and issues, of those who live outside our walls and look for ways to take the kingdom of God out to them. But it is also good news for us.

Jesus also came to bring good news to us, here in Campsie Parish Church, in our poverty, whether that is material, or spiritual; or whether we are in poor health, be it mental or physical, because there are many kinds of poverty. He came to us to release us from captivity, whether that is captivity to addictions, or that we are trapped by mental health issues, or that we are captive to habits that we can't break even although we desperately want to. He came to bring recovery of sight to us in our blindness, whether it is that we are blind to the good that is in another person, or to the right thing that we should do, or to our own faults and failings.

And he came to bind up the broken-hearted. Came to heal our wounds, our hurts, our disappointments, our griefs. And when we open our minds and our hearts to him and allow him to work in us and heal us, release us; to give us new eyes to see ourselves and one another, then we will be the kind of church where those on our doorstep who also have wounds, hurts, disappointments, and griefs will not only be welcome but will also find healing. And in that healing we will all find joy.

O come, O come, Emmanuel, bring good news to us in our poverty, heal our wounds, and ransom us from our captivity, whatever that may be.