Isaiah 35:4-7

Mark 7:24-end

I wonder if you know what one of these is. If you have children or grandchildren of a certain age, you may recognise it. It’s a toy which you can change from, in this case, a car to a robot and back. It can be two different things. Yes. It is a transformer.

The dictionary defines a transformation as *a*[*change*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/change)*in the*[*appearance*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/appearance)*or*[*character*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/character)*of something or someone,* and then adds[*especially*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/especially)*so that that thing or*[*person*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/person)*is*[*improved*](https://dictionary.cambridge.org/dictionary/english/improved).

Well, the theme of transformation – in our lives and in the world around us – and especially the idea of positive change, which brings with it an improvement or a benefit - is very much at the heart of our two readings today. The first is an extract of one of the prophecies about the coming of the Messiah, from the book of Isaiah. And the second is two stories from the ministry of Jesus from the gospel of Mark. The one then predicting the coming of Jesus. The other telling us what actually happened when he finally came. But both make the same fundamental point – that transformation at all levels in our lives and in our world is the work of God. God the creator at work in and with his creation.

So let’s spend a few minutes this morning thinking about the theme of transformation with the help of these readings.

At a basic level, transformation is physical.

The prophet Isaiah speaks of the physical change in someone when their bodies are transformed, when a blind person is able to see, a deaf person able to hear, or a person who was unable to walk suddenly finds they can. And Mark too, in our gospel reading, tells the story of a deaf man with a speech impediment, whose *ears are opened* and whose *tongue is released.* This man’s life is transformed.

In 2014, when Kelly Thomas was 19, she lost control of her truck on her way home. The truck rolled over, and her head hit the roof. The impact severely compressed her spine, causing complete paralysis of her lower body. Her surgeon told her she had maybe a 1% chance of ever walking again. However, a pioneering spinal implant was installed just below the site of her injury, and the electrodes were then connected to a spinal cord stimulator surgically implanted in her abdominal wall. Only 3 ½ months later, she was able to walk with no assistance other than a walker, and she is now flourishing in her new freedom. Kelly’s life has been transformed. She can walk again.

The prophet Isaiah also speaks of physical changes which take place in the natural world. He speaks of water which *breaks forth in the wilderness,* of *streams in the desert*, of burning sand which *becomes a pool,* and of springs on the *thirsty ground.*

We see that in our world too. Amazing natural phenomena. Here is just one example.

The Atacama desert in northern Chile is one of the driest places in the world, but, every five to seven years, there is intense rainfall, which causes buried seeds to germinate and flower. More than 200 species of plants have in fact been found to grow in the area. The normally barren landscape is transformed into a carpet of white and yellow and purple flowers.

Now these physical transformations can take place through surgery or medication or other advances in medicine. They can take place through the natural healing processes of the human body or the natural restorative processes in nature. And sometimes there is really no way of accounting for them other than seeing them as miraculous, as in the stories from Mark’s gospel. One way or another, it is God the creator who brings about the transformation of course.

I wonder what examples you can think of such a transformation in your own lives, or in the lives of people you know?

So, the transformation might be physical – in our bodies or the natural world. But it might also a transformation in our minds, in our mental state, in our attitudes or opinions or thought processes. In that sense, we need to read the words of Isaiah not only literally but also metaphorically.

There are many times in our lives when we are blind, or deaf, or speechless, or unable to act, not because of any physical problem, but because of the sort of people we are. If we then begin to understand ourselves and other people better, we see things more clearly, and we listen more attentively to other people. We are able to express our thoughts and feelings more coherently, and we are able to make wise judgements about what to do or not to do. This is about self-awareness and self-acceptance, and an emotional intelligence, which helps us to empathise with those around us.

In this transformation too, it is God who brings it about. The Holy Spirit, working in our lives through the experiences we have, the people we meet, the music we listen to, the books we read – including the Bible of course, transforms us and the people we are. Let me give you one small example from my life.

As a child I was very shy and didn’t like to socialise very much with other children. Over time I learnt how to cope in social situations, but I always found it very hard. I thought this was a fault in me. Something which I needed to fight against and get rid of. And then in my 50s, as part of my ministry training, I learnt about the difference between introverts and extroverts. That introverts get their strength from being alone whereas extroverts get their strength from being with other people. Introverts then need recovery time whereas extroverts don’t. It was a light-bulb moment. There was nothing wrong with me, nothing odd about me. I was just an introvert. It transformed both my view of myself and the world around me. And this transformation came through the Holy Spirit at work in my ministry training course.

Has God transformed you, or someone you know, in the way you think about things? Something to reflect on.

But there is still another – and arguably the most important - sort of transformation which can take place in our lives – and that is a spiritual transformation, a transformation in our relationship with God. Isaiah refers to it briefly in verse 4 when he tells his listeners that God will come and *save* them. And the interaction between Jesus and the Syrophoenician woman in Mark 7 is as much about her own spiritual needs, about a spiritual transformation, as it is about the healing of her daughter. Let me explain.

The slightly odd discussion between the woman and Jesus about throwing the children’s food to the dogs is actually about whether she can be put right with God or not, whether the salvation which Isaiah refers to, through belief in Jesus, is on offer to her. She is a gentile, a non-Jew, symbolised by the dogs in this discussion, and the children to which Jesus refers are the Jews. The good news of the coming of the Messiah comes first to the Jews, but is then shared with the gentiles. The children are fed first, in this metaphor, but then the dogs also get to eat the food too. As St Paul writes in [Romans 1:16](https://biblia.com/bible/esv/Rom%201.16) : *I am not ashamed of the gospel, because it is the power of God that brings salvation to everyone who believes: first to the Jew, then to the Gentile.*

And it is the woman’s understanding of this important truth, when she says *even the dogs under the table eat the children’s crumbs,* which shows her faith in Jesus as her saviour, and then results in her daughter being healed.

In my sermon in early August, I quoted from the French philosopher Blaise Pascal who wrote about our relationship with God, and our spiritual needs. He said this, you may remember:

*What does our craving, and our helplessness, tell us? It tells us that we once had true happiness, but that now all we are left with is an empty print and trace? We try to fill this emptiness with things from the world around us, looking for help in these things, but nothing can help, because this endless emptiness can be filled only with an infinite and unchangeable object; in other words by God himself.*

In Luke 4, when Jesus stands up in his home synagogue, he quotes from the prophet Isaiah, this time from Isaiah 61 saying:

*“The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
    because he has anointed me
    to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
    and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
19    to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”[*[*f*](https://www.biblegateway.com/passage/?search=Luke%204&version=NIV#fen-NIV-25083f)*]*

Yes, Jesus is talking here about social justice and about physical healing and freedom, he is talking about our mental and psychological state, but he is talking also about much more than that. The good news is the promise of a restored relationship with God. The acknowledgement of the God-shaped hole which each of us has. The recognition of our longing to fill that *endless emptiness* refersin our livesto which Pascal with God himself. This is about a spiritual transformation, which makes a positive difference in our lives. It is not about a one-off moment, about a moment of conversion to faith in Jesus if you like. It is about a day-to-day ongoing transformation of our lives.

But what does that transformation feel like? How do we recognise it for what it is?

Well, to go back to Pascal, it is when we no longer try to *fill this emptiness with things from the world around us*. It is about changed priorities and perspectives. It is about a new sense of peace and well-being which helps us to flourish and grow.

A couple of examples.

Many of you will know the story of John Newton – who wrote the hymn ‘Amazing Grace’ – but for those who don’t .. John Newton went to sea at a young age and worked up to being a captain of slave ships. After becoming a Christian, he was ordained into the Church of England and became a prominent campaigner against the slave trade. Newton lived to see the British Empire’s [abolition of the African slave trade in 1807](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Slave_Trade_Act_1807), just months before his death. John Newton’s priorities changed completely and his life was transformed by his Christian faith.

And nearer to home … something which I imagine we can all relate to …

During the pandemic, we have been deprived of many of those *things from the world around us* which Pascal talks about, and with which we fill our lives. We haven’t been able to go to the cinema or a restaurant. We haven’t been able to travel far from our homes. We have been restricted in which shops we can go to. We haven’t been able to socialise or entertain in our own home.

In some ways, all this has left us bereft. We have all really missed seeing family and friends. Many of us have also missed the excitement of travelling around in this country and abroad, but we have rediscovered, or even discovered for the first time, an inner strength, and a certain sense of peace in a simpler way of life. The pandemic has brought much suffering and heartache, of course it has, but it has also transformed our world and our lives in lots of different ways. I wonder if you have also found that it has in some way or other changed your relationship with God?

God then is a God of transformation at so many different levels. He transforms our physical bodies, he transforms the natural world we live in, he transforms our minds and the sort of people we are, and, above all, he transforms our relationship with him, filling forever that *endless emptiness,* that God-shaped hole.

And of course we need to remember that there is more to come.

These transformations are but a foretaste of the transformation which will take place in the new heaven and the new earth which we read about in the book of Revelation. As I close, listen again to the words of St John as he describes his vision in Revelation 21. I am going to read it in a different version from the one you are probably used to. I find that sometimes a different version of a familiar passage can give us a fresh perspective. So I am reading from The Message.

*I saw Heaven and earth new-created. Gone the first Heaven, gone the first earth, gone the sea.* ***2****I saw Holy Jerusalem, new-created, descending resplendent out of Heaven, as ready for God as a bride for her husband.* ***3-5****I heard a voice thunder from the Throne: “Look! Look! God has moved into the neighbourhood, making his home with men and women! They’re his people, he’s their God. He’ll wipe every tear from their eyes. Death is gone for good—tears gone, crying gone, pain gone—all the first order of things gone.” The Enthroned continued, “Look! I’m making everything new. Write it all down—each word dependable and accurate.”*

Amen