



### **When Art Becomes Prayer: CAFOD's Jubilee Icon for a Pilgrim Church**

Christian art is more than decoration. It is a doorway into prayer, devotion, and divine encounter. Icons, especially, act as windows into the heavenly realm, drawing us beyond mere words into sacred presence. When we gaze at an icon, our eyes meet scriptural truths, and our pilgrim hearts are offered a path toward contemplation.

CAFOD's Jubilee Icon, painted by Mulugeta Araya, a 30-year-old Ethiopian artist and engineer educated at St Mary's College in Wukro, Ethiopia, offers precisely such an invitation. Commissioned to mark the Jubilee Year 2025 "Pilgrims of Hope", it depicts Jesus reading from Isaiah 61: 1-2 in Nazareth, as recounted in Luke 4:16-21: 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me... to proclaim good news to the poor, liberty to the captives...'. A beautiful Icon, accompanying beautiful words.

In Araya's portrayal, Christ stands in solidarity with those on the margins, his gesture evoking liberation, healing, and Jubilee hope. The Icon reflects not only the biblical announcement, but also Araya's own context: coming from Tigray, Ethiopia; a region marked by displacement, poverty, and resilience. His vision unites Scripture and lived reality into one image of solidarity.

When Christians pray before this Icon, we do more than just look. We watch Jesus, we listen to Him read, and we reflect on the words 'Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing' (Luke 4:21). The visual encounter becomes verbal encounter, communal encounter! As we meditate, we join the jubilee song of Christ for a world weighed down by injustice.

This is no novelty in Christian art. Throughout history, artists have sought to depict Luke 4 or Isaiah 61. Though less common than themes like the Annunciation or depicting many parables such as the Good Samaritan, these passages have inspired works that show prophets like Michelangelo's Isaiah on the Sistine Chapel's ceiling and Raphael's Isaiah in Rome; figures holding scrolls whilst their prophetic gaze turns to future hope of liberation. These frescoes remind us that Christian art has long portrayed their prophetic voice: heralding freedom and hope.

What makes Araya's Jubilee Icon deeply effective is its rootedness in community and story. His Ethiopian tradition of icon painting, coupled with his engineering background and commitment to solidarity, give the image earthy authenticity. The Scriptures Jesus is holding are at the very centre of the Icon, just as they have to be at the very centre of our lives. The rainbow of peace and the figures listening as a community reflect our Catholic faith across borders and cultures.

Thus, this Icon becomes prayer. In its colours and composition, its gestures and symbols, it speaks the Gospel in visual language. It offers us an invitation: to see Jesus in marginal faces, to hear the scroll unrolled again, and to answer the call to proclaim the good news.

May CAFOD's Jubilee Icon lead us deeper into prayer, deeper into the Gospel, and inspire us to live its proclamation in solidarity with the poor, oppressed and marginalised.

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