

Sermon for WHCC, Sunday 23rd January 2022

Gospel: Luke 4:14-21, Jesus reads from the scroll of Isaiah.

Epistle: 1 Cor 12:12-31, Unity and diversity within the Body of Christ

The Bible is essentially Divine Revelation – or in other words, God letting us know, or revealing to us, what he wants us to know about him, his plan for us, and how he wants us to respond.

God's Divine Revelation is intrinsically linked to the revelation of the Messiah – God's Anointed One, with essentially the Old Testament pointing towards the Messiah, towards Jesus the Christ, and the New Testament being the confirmation, fulfilment, or the outworking of the Messiah. And today's Gospel reading from Luke illustrates this very well.

Picking up the reading from Luke 4:14, it says,

14 Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit,

And where was Jesus returning from? Well, Luke tells us in the previous verse – verse 13, which says,

13 When the devil had finished all this tempting, he left him until an opportune time.

Jesus was returning from that awful time of temptation by the devil in the wilderness. And it's not clear what the timeframe was between leaving the wilderness and returning to Galilee, however, some would claim it could have been quite some time, maybe even as long as a year – but we simply don't know.

So, from the first few words of verse 14 we learn that Jesus returned to Galilee. We also learn something else highly significant. Jesus returned to Galilee "in the power of the Spirit,". Just as Jesus was "full of the Holy Spirit...and was led by the Spirit into the wilderness" where he was tempted by the devil, (as Luke tells us at the beginning of this chapter, 4:1) so now Jesus returned from the wilderness to Galilee, "in the power of the Spirit,".

Finishing verse 14, we read,

and news about him spread through the whole countryside.

This too, is highly significant, for Luke tells us that Jesus' return to Galilee was not simply a case of Jesus having a bit of a holiday after a rough time in the wilderness; no, Jesus was doing stuff, he was very active. And, in verse 15, one of the things that Luke tells us Jesus was doing was that,

15 He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

So, not only was he teaching in their synagogues, but he must have been doing a fine job, as *everyone* praised him! Not *some of them*, or even *most of them*, but *everyone* praised him! I don't know how many of you are teachers or have been involved with preaching and teaching, but I'm sure you would understand the rarity of a teaching event which resulted in everyone praising the teacher! And yet, here we have Jesus being praised by everyone on multiple occasions, for his teaching in their synagogues.

And so special was this situation, that no doubt word got around the region of Galilee, of just how praiseworthy Jesus was. And one of the towns within this region of Galilee, where the amazing reputation of Jesus would have reached, was Nazareth, Jesus' hometown, where he had now arrived.

Continuing from verse 16, Luke writes,

16 He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, 17 and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:

And before we get into what is written, let me make a few points here,

Firstly, what Luke is reporting here is nothing unusual. It was customary, at a synagogue gathering such as this, for a guest or visiting rabbi to be given the opportunity to read God's Word and offer an exposition, interpretation, explanation of what they had just read.

Secondly, it was also customary within the synagogue context, to read a portion from the Scriptures each day, usually alternating between reading from the Torah one day and a reading from the prophets on the next day. On this particular occasion it was a reading from the prophets – the prophet Isaiah no less.

And thirdly, it says that Jesus found the place within this scroll of Isaiah where he was going to read from. Maybe he even timed the day of the visit knowing that the scroll of Isaiah was going to be selected; suggesting that the choice of this particular reading was quite deliberate, that there was a sense of purpose behind this selection, which will become apparent as the reading unfolds.

Just as an aside, some years ago I made a scroll of the book of Isaiah. I printed out all sixty-six chapters from Isaiah's writings onto A4 pages using a font size I hoped was pretty much to scale, then stuck all the pages together to create a scroll. And when stretched out, the scroll would span a distance beyond the size of this stage. And I tell you that, to try and give a little bit of an insight into the size of the scroll Jesus was handling, and the time it may well have taken for him to find within this scroll the words he was about to read.

And so, Jesus read, as Luke records in verses 18 to 19,

18 "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."

The Old Testament prophet, Isaiah, lived around 750BC. (and that doesn't mean 750 years Before Covid!). And of all the prophetic writings of the Old Testament, Isaiah is regarded as the most messianic, or in other words, the one that points most towards Jesus, the Messiah. His description of the messianic mission, as God's servant, as explained in Isaiah chapter 53, is quite remarkable; the Messiah was to be the sin-bearer and saviour of the people, the Lord and Conqueror.

So it is not without deep implications that Jesus read as he did from the scroll of Isaiah.

From verse 20 Luke continues,

20 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. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

When Jesus had finished reading the passage from Isaiah, he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down, which all sounds fairly routine. But it also says that the people fixed their eyes upon him. Why were their eyes fixed upon Jesus?

The practical reason is simply because the act of sitting down was the signal that he was going to teach them something. This is quite different from what we do here, where the reader gets up and comes to the front, reads the reading then sits back down again. In the synagogue setting, as I touched on earlier, it was customary for a guest or visiting rabbi to be given the opportunity to read and expound God's word. And having read God's word it was now time for Jesus to speak to those gathered at the synagogue and offer his insights – to preach a sermon to them if you like.

And he would have sat on a special preaching seat to do this, a seat set aside for teachers or preachers to sit on, while the rest of those gathered at the synagogue would have sat on the ground – sitting at the feet of the rabbi.

So, that's the practical reason why their eyes were fixed upon Jesus.

The second, and perhaps more important reason, is the fact that those gathered at the synagogue, knew Jesus. He had grown up in Nazareth, he was a local lad in a small town, and his background and family would have been well known to them.

And he had been away from them for a while, and no doubt they would have heard the stories of his incredible ministry, the stories of his flawless teaching in the synagogues that was worthy of so much praise from everyone. And now, and now, he was before them and was about to preach to them for the first time. What was he going to say?

20... The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. 21 He began by saying to them, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

Now remember that this occurred after Jesus' testing in the wilderness – his first victorious encounter with the devil. And Luke tells us that Jesus returned to Galilee, not worn out or bedraggled from his wilderness encounter, but "in the power of the Spirit." So, in the power of the Spirit he said, "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing."

What then is this scripture saying, what was being fulfilled by the words Jesus was reading from Isaiah?

And it's important to note that Jesus' quote of Isaiah, as recorded by Luke, differs subtly from what is written in Isaiah, in two ways.

1. Firstly, Jesus doesn't include the words, "and the day of vengeance of our God," which is in the two verses from Isaiah (Isaiah 61:1-2).
2. Secondly, a previous verse from Isaiah (Isaiah 58:6) had been included, with the verse literally saying, "to send forth the oppressed in release."

And what is the effect of these changes?

Well, I think this becomes a little clearer when reading a less flowing, more stilted translation of what Jesus said.

“Spirit of the Lord is upon *me*,
For he has anointed *me*;
To preach good news to the poor he has sent *me*:
To proclaim for the captives release,
and to the blind sight;
To send forth the oppressed in release;
To proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

The first half of this quote from Isaiah is about who Jesus is; the second half is about why he came.

And remember he was quoting from Isaiah, with its strong messianic theme, and he was saying, “Look, it’s me that Isaiah was talking about. It’s me who is anointed by God, it’s me who has the Spirit of the Lord, and it’s me who has been sent.”

Why? To release people from their captivities, to release people from their oppression, and this is not restricted to financial poverty or even spiritual poverty, but to a host of things which were preventing people from a wholeness of life and being free before God. Jesus came to release people, to free people. He came to give sight to the blind – which again is not just about physical healing, but is about receiving revelation, and experiencing salvation and being part of God’s family.

And what about the expression, “to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.” – what is this about?

Well, this refers to the year of Jubilee, which, according to Leviticus 25:9-14, was the fiftieth year after seven cycles of seven years, and was the year in which servants were freed and possessions were returned to their owners. It was a year which gave a new start, especially for those who had sold themselves or their land to escape poverty.

And Jesus had come to proclaim this amazing celebration of freedom, to proclaim this amazing celebration of liberty from every form of entrapment.

As one contemporary scholar and preacher puts it, this was

“The greatest emancipation proclamation in the history of the world.”

Out of all this lengthy scroll of the prophet Isaiah, Jesus chose the words he chose. He deliberately, unrolled the scroll to a particular point, read what he read, sat down to preach, and said, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.” And who were they hearing from? Jesus. He was the fulfilment of what Isaiah wrote 750 years or so earlier, regarding the Messiah. He was the fulfilment of what generation after generation would have read and learned about over the past seven centuries. Here, in front of them, in front of his townsmen, gathered on the floor of this synagogue in Nazareth, was the Messiah.

Jesus - God incarnate; Jesus the revelation of God; Jesus – God physically in this world. Why? To proclaim the good news of release for those who are oppressed, those who for whatever reason are bound, who are in captivity, who are constricted and are unable to experience the joy of God’s favour, the joy of God’s love.

And isn’t that essentially the Gospel message – the message of who Jesus is and why he came? The message of the Messiah, the Anointed One by God’s Holy Spirit, to declare “the greatest emancipation proclamation in the history of the world.”

Jesus was physically in the world for what 30 to 33 years. Indeed, we are told that his adult ministry was for only about 3 years. He is no longer physically in this world and hasn’t been for a couple of thousand years. And yet the proclamation of the good news, the freeing of the oppressed, the opening of people’s eyes to the truth, still continues today.

How can this be?

Cue Paul's first letter to the church in Corinth, from which we had the Epistle reading today. Cue, Paul's teaching on The Body of Christ, which includes his letter to the Colossians, where it says, "And he [Jesus] is the head of the body, the church;" (Colossians 1:18).

In a simple way, the Body of Christ is Christ in the world, in the here-and-now, because he is no longer physically among us. We, as The Body of Christ, are his arms and legs, his eyes and ears in the world, proclaiming the Good News, proclaiming who Jesus is and why he came – proclaiming that Jesus is the Messiah, the Anointed One of God who came to release those who are so bound they are unable to experience the love of God.

During Holy Week, Michael leads a service where we have the opportunity to have our hands anointed. And anointing oil is used to make an image of the cross on our hands, while the minister says the words, "Jesus has no hands but your hands."

And I guess we could extend that to say that Jesus has no feet but our feet; Jesus has no eyes but our eyes, no ears but our ears. It is through us, through The Body of Christ, that the Gospel of Jesus the Christ is proclaimed; it is through the Body of Christ that Jesus and his mission is known; it is through the Body of Christ that his work and witness continues.

And just as the Spirit of the Lord was upon Jesus, so Paul writes, "For we were all baptized by one Spirit so as to form one body...and we were all given the one Spirit to drink." (1 Corinthians 13) Indeed Paul writes quite specifically, just prior to today's passage, about the gifts of the Spirit, which the Spirit distributes to each one, each part of the body of Christ, "just as he [the Spirit] determines." (1 Corinthians 12:11)

We have upon us the same Spirit in which to be Christ's body in the world that Jesus had upon him, as he read from Isaiah in the synagogue all those years ago. Just as Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, so too, we return to our communities, our places of work, our places of play, in the power of the Holy Spirit - if we are open and willing for his Spirit to empower us.

And in the power of the Holy Spirit, we all have a part to play within The Body of Christ. We all have gifts, and they are all important for bringing the message of life and freedom into this world. And those gifts aren't age dependent. Whether we are young, old, or somewhere in between, we can all contribute in significant and valuable ways as members of the Body of Christ, acknowledging that,

1. Jesus is the Head of the Body of Christ, for there can be only one Head of the Body of Christ, Jesus the Messiah.
2. That we are prepared to be the Spirit-filled Body of Christ, putting into action the gifts of the Spirit, as the arms and legs of Jesus, the voice of Jesus, conveying the message of freedom and truth into this needy world.

The Old Testament pointed towards the Messiah, towards Jesus the Christ. The New Testament is the confirmation, fulfilment, or the outworking of the Messiah. We as the Body of Christ must continue that witness in the name, authority and leadership of Jesus, proclaiming the life that he, and only he offers, not only in this world, but in the world to come.

May we continue to declare the message of "the greatest emancipation proclamation in the history of the world."