

Sermon on Luke 4: Jesus' Mission Statement, Epiphany 3, January 23, 2022

This passage from Luke is one of my favourites. Jesus has just been baptised, and the Spirit of God came upon him and God affirmed him as his beloved Son. Then the Spirit drove him into the wilderness where he spent 40 days trying to figure out what exactly that meant and how he was to carry out this role. And what the pitfalls would be along the road. We'll read that and talk about it on the first Sunday in Lent. Now he comes out of the desert, goes back to Galilee, and starts teaching and healing. And he lands back on his own doorstep, back in Nazareth.

Jesus goes to the synagogue on Saturday, "as was his custom," says Luke. And, as a visitor, he stands up to read. They give him the scroll of Isaiah - all the prophets were read in order over a 3 year period in the synagogues - and he finds this passage from Isaiah 61 and reads it.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to

- bring good news to the poor
- He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives.
- and recovery of sight to the blind
- to let the oppressed go free
- to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

Luke, of course, wasn't Jewish and he didn't know these passages by heart, as Jesus probably did. He misquotes it a bit. He misses a bit and he adds a bit from Isaiah 58. The part about letting the blind see and the oppressed go free comes from Isaiah 58, where the prophet talks also about loosing the bonds of injustice, about sharing your bread with the hungry and clothing the naked. And Luke misses the line in Isaiah 61 that says God has sent the prophet to bind up the broken hearted. But it's all from the same section and on the same theme. Let's look at all this.

First, Jesus says that God has anointed him. This was at his baptism, when the Spirit came upon him in bodily form. Anointing was a thing that was done by the Israelites. The High Priest was anointed before he could perform his duties. These included offering sacrifices on behalf of the people, being the one who helped make peace between God and God's people. And also the priest gave judgement and taught the law of the Lord, as we see Ezra doing in the Nehemiah reading today. Kings were also anointed, to rule over Israel, to make laws, to be a judge and to lead the people into battle.

And the prophets had been talking about the one God would send to save his people, to rescue them and set them free and establish a Kingdom of peace and justice and so on and he was called the "Anointed One." In Hebrew, "anointed one" is Messiah. In Greek it's Christos, or Christ. In case you didn't know, Christ isn't Jesus' surname, though it sort of became that, but it means he is the anointed one of God. God promised to send a Messiah, who would perhaps combine these anointed roles, being both king and priest. And people were waiting for the Messiah at this point.

So when Jesus read the prophet's words that he was anointed by the Spirit, and said they'd been fulfilled, this would have been the first thing they thought of: that Jesus was the Messiah. Especially as he was reading a passage about the deliverance of Israel from exile and the re-establishment of the Kingdom in Jerusalem.

When kings and priests were anointed, they were anointed for a purpose. Jesus says what his purpose is when he reads this. He has been anointed to bring good news to the poor, liberty to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, to bind up the broken-hearted, to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

If you were poor - and some of you are poor or have been poor - what would be good news for you? Someone calling you up and saying you had been left a bequest of \$100,000? Someone saying your debts were paid? Someone paying your rent or your power this month? Or, even better, someone saying that you were going to be paid enough to live on from now on? Good news usually comes in the form of what we're lacking in life. For the poor that might be enough money. For the sick it might be better health. For the lonely, it might be a friend. And for all of us, the news that God loves us and is on our side.

Liberty for captives, freedom for the oppressed. We support Amnesty International, which works to help set free people who have been arrested for no crime and sent to jail and often tortured. They keep track of these people, maybe journalists who told the truth about what was going on, maybe someone who criticized a bad government policy, maybe a woman who wanted women to be able to have some rights and freedoms. And these people found themselves in jail. Amnesty works hard to get them released and to stop the torture. And it works. Every newsletter contains stories of people released and reunited to their families, with such happiness. This is God's work that they are doing.

But most of us are not in jail and we are not living under deep oppression, though there is oppression for some of us, especially minorities, and Jesus would have been in favour of stopping that. But this still applies to us. Right now many of us are oppressed by fear and anxiety. By loneliness. Sometimes by guilt. Jesus says he comes to set us free. And he often uses the church to help bring us into the sunshine from the dark jails we can be in.

He comes to bring light to those who live in darkness, whether that's physical blindness or just a mental or emotional darkness. I expect you've all experienced feeling like the world was pretty dark and hopeless. I know I have. And sometimes what it takes to bring light to that is someone coming and listening and just being present. Someone who cares enough to be with me, who isn't afraid of my darkness and is willing to just be with me in it. As Jesus was. We just read at Christmas how he came like the dayspring, the rising sun, to shed light on us all. And when we sit with someone in their darkness, we are also doing this work, shining the warm light of God's love on them.

My favourite is the one Luke omitted but I expect Jesus read, because it's right there in the passage: to bind up the broken-hearted. Who here has not been broken-hearted from time to time? It's part of the human condition. When our hearts are bleeding, Jesus comes to bind them up and bring healing.

All these things speak of God's compassion for those who are in pain, those who are disadvantaged, the "have-nots" of this world. And it is among these people that God's Son came and lived and declared that he would be with them and help them. His mission from God was to show compassion and help those in pain and suffering. To bring them good news, release and healing.

And that is a mission we have inherited. Paul speaks again about how we are the Body of Christ and he gives another list of gifts and callings, vocations, we might have. I think my favourite one is "forms of assistance." The King James translated it as "helps." A sort of miscellaneous category of people who have gifts that allow them to help where needed. For every prophet or apostle, we need dozens of people who have this gift of helps.

This week I have been so struck, so humbled, by hearing stories from various lay people, in this parish and in other parishes, of some of the things they are doing. And I am going to say, though they didn't, the things they are doing to advance the Kingdom of God and Jesus' mission. People volunteering, week in, week out, 2 mornings a week, at the food bank. People in another parish driving around collecting car loads of clothes for a free clothing bank at a church in Dartmouth. People helping someone who suddenly became homeless, at significant cost in time and money.

People helping their friends or family who are sick. And I don't mean bringing a casserole occasionally, though that's also good, but I mean spending days and weeks looking after them, running errands for them, cleaning their houses. People who seem to spend their whole days doing good deeds for each other. And most of the ones who can't run around doing these things any more are praying for people and calling them and sending notes. So much goodness. So much love.

All those years of hearing sermons and going to Bible Studies and praying and so on, have really paid off. You people get it. You really do get it. You understand what Paul was trying to make clear to the Corinthians, that we are all one family, all one body. When one of us suffers, all of us suffer. And because we love each other and try to follow Jesus' example, we work to reduce that suffering, in one way or another.

Every time we lighten someone's darkness a little, lift some of their burden, we are carrying out this mission that Jesus proclaimed at the beginning of his ministry, his Mission Statement. This Mission Statement that he passed on to the whole church: proclaim good news, release for captives, recovering sight for the blind, freedom for the oppressed, binding up the broken hearts. Do you remember Emmanuel's mission statement? It reflects this one: "A worshipping, loving and welcoming community, joyfully sharing God's gifts."

I have been humbled this week by hearing a few of the ways you are living this out, just a few of them from a few people. I know there are so many more, so many I haven't heard of and probably never will hear of. It makes me feel so proud of you. You people are doing the work of the church, the work we read about today that God gave Jesus to do and Jesus passed on to us, and you are doing it well and it brings you and many others a lot of joy. God bless you, and Keep up the Good Work!