

Sermon

23/01/22

1 Corinthians 12:12-31a

Luke 4:14-21

[May the words of my mouth and the meditations of all our hearts be acceptable in your sight, O Lord our strength and our Redeemer.]

I remember the very first sermon I ever gave, a little over ten years ago. I was very nervous, and didn't really know what I was doing (so nothing's changed there, then...) And when it was over, Monty the vicar stood up and said the kindest thing: "I always suspected you might have a gift for preaching; but now I *know*." So, clearly, I'm doing it wrong, because when Jesus first preached, they wanted to toss him over a cliff at the end of it. (Peter gets to preach on this part of the story at his last service next week – I wonder what he could possibly find to say about that?) To be fair, Jesus was a lot more provocative than I was trying to be. But, my goodness, he starts with a hiss and a roar, channeling the words of a of a five hundred year dead prophet:

"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."

That's how to get their attention. Then the punchline:

"Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." Boom. Mic drop. Except, he doesn't stop, and goes on – deliberately, it seems – to rile up the local crowd; as I said, you can hear about that next week.

But imagine being able to say that: "Here, now, in this place, these words have come true."

Let's just talk for a bit about where these mighty words have come from. They come, as you heard, from the book of the prophet Isaiah; but it's also pretty clear that Isaiah himself didn't write them. The reason for this is that the book was written over a period of centuries: the first half, which tells us quite a lot about the man himself, locates itself very clearly in the reigns of kings Uzziah, Ahaz, and Hezekiah, around 700 years before Christ. The next bit was written during the exile in Babylon after the destruction of Jerusalem over a century later, and the final section (from which Jesus is quoting) dates from a generation later again, after the people of Judah had returned home.

And yet, despite having been written over such a long period and under such different circumstances, there are some remarkable similarities of theme throughout, of patterns of imagery and prophetic aspiration.

It's fair to say the prophets are pretty bad-tempered a lot of the time; but it's also worth noticing what particularly gets their goat. The Christian obsession with sexual sin seems to have come along later; but there were two

things that really annoyed them: 1) idolatry; and 2) social inequality and exploitation. The increasing unaffordability of housing, families sleeping in garages and cars, the growing gap between the haves and the have-nots, exploitative employment practises, whether legal or not: these are the things that would have brought Isaiah out in a violent rash. More than any others, perhaps, the prophecies of Isaiah alternate between harsh, despairing judgements and almost delirious hope. And it is these extravagant hopes that gave the book so much of its significance.

For what is in the book itself – Iron-Age geopolitics, basically – is perhaps less important than what it came to mean after it was written. In the five hundred years or so between the words of the prophets and the time of Christ, these ambiguous and extravagant hopes began to coalesce into a quite specific image of a Saviour, a Messiah, someone who could lift Israel out of political humiliation and spiritual decay. This book in particular came to embody some of the deepest hopes of the Jewish people.

And then Jesus shows up at the Nazareth synagogue and says: “I’m here. It’s me.”

As we know, his life consciously reflected this image in many respects: he was a charismatic teacher and healer, a descendent of King David, with a deep understanding of the Law and a particular vision of the restoration of Israel; but in other respects he challenged the accepted image of the Messiah: he was no great warrior, nor a king, nor did he regard faith or righteousness in the sight of God as the exclusive property of the Jews, and he didn’t get on with the powers-that-be. He confused people, and we know what happened next...

But I’d just like just a little to unpack the idea of what it is to be a “messiah” – that’s the Hebrew; the Greek word is “christos”; “christ”. By the

time we get to Jesus, everyone is talking about The Messiah, capital T capital M, TM, trademark, Accept No Substitutes: “The One who is to come”, as John’s disciples put it, a single individual around which all of our hopes have gathered.

But, originally, in the Old Testament, the word “messiah” had a less specific, exclusive meaning. It simply meant one who was anointed: appointed, say, or chosen, set apart for a particular purpose. So this word is used of kings, of priests and prophets, the altar in the Temple, sacred vessels in the Temple, unleavened bread, and even a non-Jewish king (this was Cyrus the Great, who made the return to Jerusalem possible). Anyone, in principle, might be a messiah, in this sense.

And this is important, because there are two ways of responding to the life and actions of Jesus. One is to say: “Jesus did it all!” All the saving that needed to be done, all the liberating, all the healing, all the restoration, all the redemption, has already been done by Jesus, and, once we have accepted this, all we have to do is sit on our hands until eternity dawns. Or, is it possible that the fact that Jesus was a liberator and revealer and healer might empower *us* to do the same?

The Spirit of the Lord is upon *us*,

because he has anointed us

to bring good news to the poor.

He has sent us to proclaim release to the captives

and recovery of sight to the blind,

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to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

What would it take for us to be able to say: "Today this scripture is being fulfilled in your hearing"

This sounds like very grand rhetoric; but I don't think it necessarily *has* to mean great big gestures. Let me give you some tiny examples of what I mean. At Onslow Anglicans, when we were there, there was a roster of people who, each week, would head to the local primary school, so that they be read to be students involved in the school's reading recovery programme. It sounds very modest and unassuming, but if that's not liberating people from the chains of illiteracy, I don't know what is. (Also, given that two thirds of all prisoners are functionally illiterate, this is *literally* setting the prisoners free – before they are even imprisoned, which is surely better?)

"The Spirit of the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor." In a few minutes' time we'll take up the offering, and with it the basket for the foodbank; as one who's made use of it, I can confirm that this resource is indeed "good news for the poor."

"To proclaim recovery of sight to the blind." It is so hard to see and understand the world and the people around us. And yet there are people who help us to do this all the time: teachers, and scientists, and journalists, and counsellors, and, most of all, people who love us. Love is anything but blind, and people can only truly see themselves when they are truly loved.

"To let the oppressed go free" What is it that oppresses the people around us? Loneliness? Isolation? Self-consciousness? Economic hardship? Whenever we act to help lift the burdens of those we encounter, we are carrying out the task of Jesus, of Isaiah.

There's a poem that you possibly know, and may even have sung a version of, by Howard Thurman, a black American theologian, which it's worth remembering around this time of year: "The work of Christmas."

When the song of the angels is stilled,
When the star in the sky is gone,
When the kings and princes are home,
When the shepherds are back with their flock,
The work of Christmas begins:
To find the lost,
To heal the broken,
To feed the hungry,
To release the prisoner,
To rebuild the nations,
To bring peace among others,
To make music in the heart.

The Spirit of the Lord is upon us all, to be enlivening, liberating, healing, nurturing agents in the world.

May this scripture be fulfilled in our lives.