

Psalm 19

Luke 4.14-21

23rd January 2022 COTHA service at St John's

Good News for Today

Lord God our prayer is that you might touch my lips, open our hearts & transform our lives in the power of the Spirit and for the honour of Christ. Amen.

One advantage given to any visiting preacher is the opportunity to use old illustrations for a new congregation. It only half works for me today as some folk from AFC are here and will have heard this story before. But here goes.

A colleague of mine told me, many years ago now, of the Sunday before Christmas when his Sunday School put on a play during morning service. They had papered over the windows and acquired a spotlight for the stage, so it felt like a proper theatre. It ended with a heart-warming scene of a church service which had been attended by a homeless person. In the spirit of Christmas, this was a play remember, he was taken home by a family to share their lunch. The message was about grounding our faith and loving our neighbour, and everyone thought the play was excellent.

And then, my colleague said, the lights came up, and during the play a real-life homeless person had actually come into the church. Something that had never happened before. He said everyone seemed more than a little embarrassed and in real life not half so enthusiastic to invite the man home for Sunday lunch.

I think the whole experience for that church became a local parable, told and re-told to succeeding generations, never losing its challenge.

Today's reading takes us to Nazareth. Jesus is back home. He reads the appointed scriptures all about supporting the poor, healing

the sick and honouring the downtrodden and says, in effect, these are not aspirations or the story line from a play. This mission needs to touch the ground now. This isn't something just to push into the future because looking out for each other, walking at the speed of love and supporting those with no voice is good and Godly work for today. Well, it didn't go down too well. It was, of course, Good News for the Poor, but because its message had consequences for the way we spend our money or the effort needed to build a fairer world, it obviously seemed like Bad News for the not so poor.

Nazareth was a homecoming for Jesus. Momentum was building and his reputation growing. So, like Dominic Raab or Lucy Winkett returning to Amersham Jesus returns to this part of the Galilee region. It wasn't far from Sephoris, the major town in the area, raised to the ground by the Romans and rebuilt during Jesus' growing years. It's more than probably that he would have joined his father, Joseph, in helping with its reconstruction.

However, I suspect the dominant childhood memory at the forefront of his mind that day was of his beloved mother. For so much of what he says next seems to have come from her.

The Holy Spirit has a big walk on part in both Luke and the Acts of the Apostles. God seems to enliven and inspire some of the central characters such as Elizabeth, Zechariah, Simeon, John and of course Mary.

Sometimes our mothers really do a thing or two and what we receive from them in our early years stays with us.

Upon hearing she is to be the mother of Jesus Mary sings of God lifting the poor and hungry and sending the rich away empty. One of the most cutting and radical statements found anywhere in scripture.

How, I wonder did she feel that morning? Perhaps both she and

Jesus were recalling long conversations after supper when she shared with him her understanding of faith. A faith that never seems to have left her, but one that meant she was there at his first miracle in Cana of Galilee and faithfully standing at his cross on Good Friday.

In the Potter books J.K. Rowling has it said of Harry that he had his mother's eyes. I think it could be said of Jesus, he had his mother's theology. It's as if he had fully and personally taken on board the Magnificat and that would sum up what he had to say that day, on day one of his first publicly spoken words in Nazareth.

And so, it's Saturday and it's time for Synagogue. The whole village was probably there and the story zooms in and the tempo slows down. As an honoured guest Jesus is asked to read from the biblical scroll, words from Isaiah lovingly and respectfully laid before him.

They speak of the heart of his mission and message. His task, his leadership and his manifesto aren't something out of the blue, but out of scripture. And he ends the reading with a phrase that shocks, challenges, encourages and annoys: *Today the scripture has come true!*

Luke does this again and again. Luke never paints a comfortable Jesus but a radical preacher, the one who in Nazareth is rejected, as he will be in Jerusalem three years later.

An obvious reason for this is also a simple one. Faith in God must result in love for neighbour. And some people are not keen to make that connection, preferring faith to remain a purely private and pious activity. Desmond Tutu used to get truly annoyed at such an understanding of Christianity, once saying: *When people tell me the Bible isn't political, I wonder what book they are reading!*

Faith has to move from the personal to the corporate.

I mean Jesus begins with the singular: The Spirit is upon me. I suppose we all must begin there. Faith needs to take light in own personal hearts. But then he moves rapidly and inevitably to the plural. The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, personal....so I may bring the good news to the poor, the prisoners, the blind and the downtrodden..., corporate.

2022 is a Jubilee year here in Britain, and the fourth such celebration for the Queen. The Silver Jubilee of 1977, celebrating 25 years seemed like a huge milestone, to celebrate 70 in 2022 is exceptional.

Jubilees were part of the Jewish tradition. Every fifty years slaves would be freed, debts cleared, and land returned. The idea was that burdens needed to be lifted and new starts built into the culture of society. No wonder these milestones were colloquially known as the *Year of the Lord's Favour*.

But the truth was, they very rarely happened. Jubilees were talked about in principle but then conveniently forgotten. The slaves remained in chains, debts grew to become unpayable, and land was lost forever.

There was a spoonful of sugar dished out to make this bitter pill go down and it was to make the idea of Jubilee into a heavenly concept. These would be the freedoms and liberations to look forward to in the next life. Oppression lingered in this one.

Maybe it's always an easy fix, making something into a spiritual aspiration kicks it into the long grass.

But Jesus was having none of it! Instead, he talks of good news for the poor in the present, not the future tense. He spoke with an urgency that challenged and made him unpopular.

Now it doesn't escape my notice this morning that today we COTHA people have the privilege of worshipping in a Methodist Church.

So, let me say just how much this Baptist minister admires the ministry of the Methodist minister, John Wesley.

Wesley didn't wait for tomorrow to live a good and Godly life, he never postponed his prayers or spiritualised the goals of Jesus' Good News.

Instead, in his day, in the then and there of the 18th century he became an abolitionist, preaching that slavery was the *sum of all villainies*, and mentoring William Wilberforce as he took the Abolition Bill through parliament.

Wesley didn't long for a day when women could serve alongside men as preachers, instead he commissioned Sarah Crosby to be a public preacher in 1761.

Wesley died with hardly any money to his name because he spent his life giving it away in the here and now, some £30,000 worth, opening orphanages and establishing charities.

Is it little wonder that this small man became a giant figure in Methodism, so much so that at his death the newspapers referred to him as the *Best loved man in England*.

And I want to say to our friends at St John's your COTHA colleagues recognise that you have lived with that good and Godly faith during these decades you have worshipped in and served from these buildings, and your service in our neighbourhood and community has been blessed by God, and it has been a privilege for us all in COTHA to serve alongside you since the beginning of our church covenant.

So, what do we make of Jesus' first sermon? I think the punchline is: *Today, all this has come true.*

We mustn't postpone our jubilees or spiritualise justice for another

day.

There is an urgency in Christianity, an impatience even. It drove on Jesus, Wesley, Tutu – does it energise us?

I suspect it does and it needs to more. Whether it's supporting Christian Aid's campaigns for justice, donating to overseas mission, supporting EcoChurch, being a school governor, a town councillor or the best parent or grandparent you can be. Making our faith count now. Making it count in all those entries we have in our diary for this the last full week of January 2022.

Jesus stood up in the synagogue and read words of good news offering hope for the oppressed and opportunities for the marginalised. He framed his mission in ancient words from Isaiah that describe God's peace filled kingdom. He then sat down and said: it starts now.

A song from Iona puts it this way:

Heaven shall not wait
 For triumphant Hallelujahs,
 when earth has passed
 and we reach another shore:
 Jesus is Lord
 in our present imperfection
 his power and love are for now,
 And then for ever more.

May it be so in the name of Jesus, who calls us all to share with him in his mission of love and light TODAY.

Amen