

Sermon for Sunday after Ascension (16 May 2021) *Mother Emma*

[Readings: Isaiah 61, Luke 4:14-21]

Our Gospel reading this morning describes the beginning of Jesus' ministry in the synagogue at Nazareth; his first words expressing the essence of his calling and mission, as he echoes the prophetic words of Isaiah. It is a passage often chosen by newly appointed parish incumbents to be the Gospel reading at their licensing, reminding them of the daunting, but inspiring calling which following Christ implies for all of us, lay and ordained, as we seek to share the core message of our faith with others.

I was somewhat chastened by one of my churchwardens commenting recently that 90% of the vicar's role lay in the weekly sermon. Acutely conscious that my rather overfull diary for the week currently allots only one day in six for writing sermons, I have concluded that his perception stems partly from the observation that none of us is able to devote enough time to the study of Scripture, and the sermon slot offers us all a precious moment to reflect on the word of God, whether guided by the preacher, or simply following a thought prompted by their words.

When I first studied preaching as a trainee Reader nearly twenty years ago, the tutor used as an example our passage recording Jesus' first "sermon" – indeed, the only example we have of his teaching within the context of public worship. He concluded: "Preaching in the New Testament is about proclaiming, announcing and declaring the good news."

Reflecting on the meaning of this passage for us today, how could one better sum up the call to all Christians to share the good news as we respond to the example set by Jesus' chosen text from Isaiah:

'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.'

Following the affirming and inspiring experience of his baptism in the Jordan and his costly struggle with his own demons in the wilderness, Jesus has returned to Nazareth filled with the power of the Holy Spirit and driven to share the good news of the coming of God's kingdom far and wide. His message, as throughout Luke's Gospel, is that the arrival of the Kingdom will bring joy, release and freedom to all those held captive by poverty, society, infirmity or injustice. Given the first-century belief that sickness and disability were often a direct consequence of the wrongdoing of the sufferer, there is also a sub-text in this passage that the Kingdom will bring in healing and release in the sense of forgiveness of sin, and redemption from God's anger.

The phrase "The year of the Lord's favour", would have spoken to Jesus' synagogue listeners of the Old Testament law of the year of Jubilee, or the year of Release, a concept legally

enshrined in the book of Leviticus as every fiftieth year when all debts should be cancelled, and all Hebrew slaves set free.

The implication is that the inbreaking of the Kingdom will, in every sense, bring freedom for the people of God. It is a powerful message for our current time.

But strikingly the text of the Isaiah passage recorded by Luke isn't a strictly accurate quotation of the original Old Testament prophecy, as we will have gathered when we heard the two read this morning. Jesus – or Luke – has left out the phrase in the original passage which refers to the “day of vengeance of our God”, and instead has added in the line, “to let the oppressed go free”, taken from elsewhere in Isaiah. It is being made clear that the teaching Jesus brings in this opening stage of his ministry is not one of vengeance and judgement, but of forgiveness and the breaking of bonds.

The alterations epitomise the shift, emphasised by St Paul, between an Old Testament religion based around the importance of the law and a potentially wrathful God; and a new covenant which would demonstrate the compassionate and redemptive love of the Father. They introduce the radical concept of the oppressed, rejected and marginalised as the prime recipients of God's forgiving and abundant generosity.

Our Gospel passage does not include the varied reaction, moving from approval to anger, of the people gathered in the Nazareth synagogue that day, but this too, has much to teach us. As a nation who saw themselves as uniformly “oppressed” by their Roman occupiers, one wonders how much the initial reaction of Jesus' hearers (who we are told were impressed by his “gracious words”) was in part due to a political hearing of his preaching. Perhaps they heard in his “good news” the announcement that God was coming to free *them* from foreign rule and the financial and social injustices which went with it. But when Jesus continues by rebuking them for expecting first and foremost healing, miracles and release for *themselves*, rather than understanding that the good news of the Kingdom is to be shared with the poor, the foreigner and the outcast, with those whom they ignore or fail to see in the society around them, they become angry and resentful.

There is no doubt that all of us should hear in Jesus' words to the synagogue congregation a message of hope, forgiveness, and freedom. Those of us called to follow him in life are promised the eternal joys of God's heavenly Kingdom.

But there is also a challenge in his interpretation of Isaiah – how do we ourselves fulfil our part in the coming of the Kingdom? How do we identify the oppressed, the poor, the captives and the blind in the world around us, both near and far, and what can we do to share with them the good news – and the practical enacting - of God's eternal love and forgiveness?

If the role of the Christian preacher is to proclaim, announce and declare the good news, so for every Christian this message should lie at the heart of our personal faith, and our interaction with others – the Kingdom of God is close at hand, bringing freedom, forgiveness, joy, love, and everlasting hope for all.

Amen