

Luke 4:14-21

27.1.19

The jubilee Community

One lesson that politicians might learn from recent world events – if they didn't know it already - is 'beware of campaign promises!' Although he claimed otherwise last week, I wonder if David Cameron now regrets committing his party to holding a referendum on Britain's membership of the European Union in the 2015 party manifesto. And I wonder if deep down Donald Trump does not now regret combining in one sentence in his campaign rallies the words 'border', 'wall', 'Mexico' and 'pay for it'. Campaign promises have a habit of coming back to bite politicians.

Now, this might seem like an odd way to begin a sermon on chapter 4 of Luke's Gospel which describes the return of Jesus to his home town of Nazareth at the start of his public ministry. He was not a candidate in any elections. He wasn't exactly campaigning. In fact what we read took place in the town synagogue – in other words it took place in 'religious' surroundings, in the place where 'religious' texts were read and discussed and that of course means - as we all know - that what went on that day in that synagogue had nothing whatsoever to do with politics, for politics and religion – as we all know - do not mix and inhabit different planets. Well, if that is what you think, it's high time to think again.

Last week in my sermon I was suggesting that Christians have badly betrayed the Gospel by eliminating the centrality and significance of the church, the people of God, in God's plan for bringing salvation to the world. Too much theology has all but written the church out of God's strategy for the world. So there's a version of the Gospel that can be summed up by saying that the world has gone wrong, we're all sinners, Jesus came to save us and if you believe in him you'll go to heaven. In that account the church is an after-thought: it's just a gathering of individuals who are on their way to heaven – yippee! Well, that is not the story the Bible tells and it has never been more vital – especially in these days of secularism and suspicion of religion – that we rediscover the place of the church in God's plans and how we fit into it as individuals. And aside from our reading from Luke's Gospel that is very much the concern of Paul's Letter to the Corinthians which I preached on last week and which we read in parallel to Luke this morning. It's all about Christ

existing as community, the church as the Body of Christ and his tangible presence on earth. So this morning I want to ask what might we learn about the church from Jesus' sermon in his home of Nazareth.

Well, the first thing we learn is that as the Body of Christ and the expression of Christ in the world, the church has a manifesto, and it is based on Jesus' manifesto for his ministry which he is laying out here in his home-town. And if the word 'manifesto' has political overtones, well – so it should, because the passage that Jesus quotes here is political through and through. Listen again:

‘The spirit of the Lord is upon me
to bring good news to the poor...
to proclaim release to the captives...
recovery of sight to the blind,
to let the oppressed go free.’

Now, of course, there are those who will spiritualise all this by saying that Jesus is talking here of those who are spiritually poor and who are captive to sin and blind to the truth of God. Well, people would say that, especially those who have a vested interest in the status quo and in social arrangements that benefit them – but suffice to say that if this message which Jesus lived out in his ministry had been intended to be spiritualised and de-politicized like that then Jesus would not have ended up being crucified but would have ended up in a retirement home for benevolent rabbis who has some interesting things to say about God, the 'spiritual life', and the importance of being nice to each other. No – crucifixion was for political subversives and in that sense Jesus fully deserved it. So 'poor' in this quote from Isaiah means poor. 'Oppression' means oppression: the oppression that comes to those who end up at the bottom of a society that worships mammon. So that is the first point. The church has a manifesto based upon Jesus' manifesto. And its political through and through.

The second thing we learn about the church from this passage is that the church has a language – and let me explain. Jesus here quotes from the prophet Isaiah who refers to God's servant who will let the oppressed go free and 'proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' Now, what does that mean: 'the year of the Lord's favour'? What is it referring to? Well, in order to understand that we have to refer to an institution in ancient Israel known as 'the sabbath year'. In ancient Israel the sabbath was not just a day once a week but it was also a year every seventh year. And the sabbath year was good news for some and

less good news for others. It was good news first of all for the land because the land lay fallow and rested. The land had rest and could not be exploited – it was left alone every seven years. But the sabbath year was also good news for slaves as they had to be released. You could be forced into slavery for six years but in the seventh year you were liberated. And the sabbath year was good news too for those in debt for every seven years debts were written off – just imagine that! And then every seven sabbath years – in other words every 50 years – there was what was called the Jubilee year in which, as in the sabbath year, the land lay untended and slaves were released and debts cancelled, only as well as that any land that had been sold returned to its original owner. So if you were some big property developer you could buy up as much land as you liked, benefitting no doubt from downturns in the economy – but every year it all returned to its original owners.

So the Sabbath and Jubilee years had ecological and economic and political dimensions, and they worked against extremes of wealth and poverty. They were social, regulatory mechanisms that resisted disparity of wealth. And what is beautiful is that the Jubilee year began on the Day of Atonement when God dealt with Israel's sin. In other words the Jubilee year included the forgiveness of sins – social, structural sins in the life of the nation, and also individual sins too. Salvation includes the forgiveness of sins - of course! - but it has far wider horizons. And every 50th year everyone was given a fresh start and everything returned to a level playing field. And – surprise, surprise – there is no evidence that the sabbath and Jubilee years were ever practiced in Israel: of course not! Why would they be when the very people who could have made them happen - well, it was hardly in their interests! Redistribution of wealth? What?! Land left untended: what a wasted opportunity for profit! But Isaiah here in the passage Jesus quotes is speaking at time when God is on the move and something new is happening in the life of the nation: they are returning home from exile in Babylon. They are making a fresh start and what better way to celebrate a fresh start than with a Jubilee! And that's why Jesus chooses this passage in the synagogue. He too is proclaiming that with his arrival God is doing something new. God is back on the scene. 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing!' In effect Jesus is saying, 'it's a fresh start - so let's declare a Jubilee! And I don't think Jesus was meaning this literally – he had neither the power nor the authority to literally declare a Jubilee. But what he is doing is taking that ancient theme and imaginatively and creatively

reinterpreting it for his ministry. In that sense he had a language with which to proclaim his message, a language that drew on deep currents in his nation's psyche.

So too with us as a church. It's not enough to have a manifesto – we need a language in which to couch it. So much of political discourse today is flat and thin, bureaucratic and clichéd. We talk of peace and justice but these terms need to be filled out and enriched by being embedded in foundational stories and traditions that give them depth and power. Two weeks ago was Martin Luther King Day in the USA and he provides a brilliant example of this. King did not just speak of racial justice and an end to discrimination. In fantastic flights of oratory he echoed ancient biblical cadences, drawing on those narrative wellsprings that his faith gave him: the exodus, the exile, Moses, the mountain top, Isaiah – and his language fired his manifesto.

So with us: the church has a language of its own. We join with the world in speaking of justice and peace and they are part of our manifesto, but our language has depth and resonance, emerging as it does from the story of God's people. And of course our distinctive language is also expressed in song which gives it additional power and Martin Luther King's movement had its songs. And these were often the old slave songs of liberation that drew upon the Bible, but gloriously reconfigured and recast the Biblical imagery – and thus profoundly subverted the songs of the oppressors, the slave owners. But that's another story. For now, Jesus the Jew had a language in which to couch his manifesto and so do we – a language in which we are versed by our Scriptures and that give us a distinct identity.

That brings me, lastly, to one final point. Along with its manifesto and its language the church that is shaped by Christ has an identity that is shaped by the Jubilee. And in these days of secularism and church decline the church faces a massive identity-crisis. In a post-Christian society, who are we? Who or what is the church? What does it mean to be the Body of Christ? Well, maybe we could begin to answer that by following Jesus and taking the Jubilee as key to who we are. We could follow Jesus by creatively and imaginatively reinterpreting Jubilee for our time. What would it mean for the Church to be the Jubilee community? How would that affect our life together and our impact on the world? How would it influence our mission? How would we live as citizens of earth and of heaven if we were to live out now the year of the Lord's favour? How would it be if we were to actually believe that back there in

Nazareth, in the synagogue on the sabbath day, our Lord rolled up the scroll and declared, ‘Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in you hearing’? Amen.

Holy and gracious God,
we praise and worship you our Maker,
our Saviour, our Redeemer.
We praise and thank you that you have brought
us to the beginning of a new day,
and the beginning of a new week,
close to the beginning of a new year.
We praise you for your faithfulness
in bringing day out of night,
light out of darkness,
newness out of what is old and tired.
For we come this morning carrying things
that we would want to lay down and let go of.
We come in need of release:
release from habits that grip us,
from failures that hold us captive,
from behaviour that is not really us.
We confess to you our sins and look to you
for forgiveness, for a fresh start.
And we thank you that you meet us here
with arms outstretched,
ready to tend us with the water of cleansing
and the oil of blessing.
Come Holy Spirit of newness and raise
us up to new life.
We pray in the name of Jesus in whose words
we pray, saying...