

## Sermon by John Boylan, Authorised Lay Preacher, All Saints Church Wokingham

27<sup>th</sup> January 2019

**“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me..”**

When I first started training as a Lay Preacher, David allowed me to serve my apprenticeship practicing on the congregation at Evensong. It was a good learning curve because I could get instant feedback by waylaying the congregation as they went out – both of them! Eventually David felt that he would take the risk of letting me loose on the Sunday Morning congregation. But here I got a very different form of feedback. Sarah, my wife told me that she didn't come to Church to hear me stand up in the pulpit – “I want to hear a professional” and then in her words “I know what you are like”! To be fair she does have a point.

But the prophet in his home land scenario is familiar to us all. Its true that we occasionally take more notice or react more positively to someone we don't know well than to someone we do. It's nothing new.

So today we read about Jesus coming home, returning to Nazareth, “where he had been brought up”. Unlike Matthew 13.54 and Mark 6.1-6 who both refer to the visit later in their gospels as Jesus' last visit to a synagogue, Luke, places this episode at the start of Jesus' ministry. Neither Matthew or Mark elaborate on what Jesus said but they do confirm the subsequent rejection simply saying that “they took offence at him”. It is left to Luke to fill in the detail. But as always it's not as straight forward as it first reads.

We are told that following his fasting and temptation in the desert Jesus returned to Galilee where “a report about him spread through all the surrounding country. He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone”. So, he was obviously making an impact and the scene is set. It is time for Jesus, returning with a reputation, and according to Luke “filled with the power of the spirit”, to teach in his home synagogue. As was customary, he stood up to read and took the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. There are 66 chapters in Isaiah so it would have been a big scroll. But he found the place he wanted to read from – Isaiah 61. Did Jesus choose this passage or was it co-incidence? We will never know but the words he reads out are very significant.

“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”.

Except, these are not the words written in Isaiah 61. Yes, they are similar, but Jesus has re-ordered them added in the “good news to the poor” and omitted the second half of what is arguably the key line in Isaiah's message, not only to proclaim the year of the Lord but and this is the bit missed out, also the “day of vengeance of our God”.

To clarify, the year of the Lord was theoretically supposed to occur every 50 years starting on the Day of Atonement. During the following year no-one would farm the fields, people would live off what the land provided naturally. Debts would be wiped out and slaves freed. The land that was mortgaged would be returned to its original owners. Sounds good, but in Isaiah, there would also be God's vengeance on those who had profited from or worked the system to their advantage at the cost to others less

fortunate. So, it was good news for some but also bad news for others. But Jesus chose to leave out the vengeance warning.

So why did Jesus edit the reading? I doubt that it was the prerogative of the reader to change the text because this was Holy Scripture. The Law of Moses prescribed that all Jews should diligently teach their children scripture, so it wouldn't do to go around altering the words handed down from generation to generation.

But this was no mistake. This was deliberate. Think back. We've heard words like this before in Luke. In the Magnificat, the Song of Mary. Mary's words to Elizabeth proclaim the power of God "He has brought down the powerful from their thrones and lifted up the lowly; he has filled the hungry with good things and sent the rich away empty". And perhaps more significantly when the baby Jesus is presented at the Temple, Simeon declares that "my eyes have seen your salvation, which you have prepared in the presence of all peoples, a light for the revelation to the Gentiles" (Luke 2.29-32).

And it is here that we start to see why Jesus was rejected. Luke's infancy narratives had already hinted at the division Jesus would cause in Israel. By the time Luke wrote his gospel, most of Israel had rejected Jesus and the proclamation of the gospel – the stories of the struggles of the early church are well documented in Acts.

Luke's writing is firmly based on the redemptive work of God, but many scholars believe that the story also reflects Luke's own personal experiences in his own time. The rejection of Jesus is a tragedy for Luke, and he wrestles with the question as to why it happened hinting that the rejection maybe a reflection of God abandoning his ancient people Israel in order to start a new covenant with a new people. But I'm getting ahead of myself.

When Jesus sat down (the practice was to stand to read scripture but sit down to study it) his words "Today this scripture (which everyone knew as the Messiah prophecy) has been fulfilled in your hearing" were actually not the catalyst for angering the Jews present in the synagogue as is often believed. The next line in the passage says "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth" (Luke 4.22). It is only later when Jesus senses a building hostility, maybe a familiarity, a jealousy or anger at the 'local boy talking as if he had a personal insight into God. The local carpenter talking of a peaceful Messiah rather than the warrior King that the Israelites hoped for. Jesus forcefully pushes back with the proverb regarding the inevitability of a city rejecting prophetic messages of one who is their own. It is at that point that it starts to go wrong. When Jesus then talks about the message being for the Gentile as well as the Jew, citing two infamous examples where Elijah and Elisha had worked with the Gentiles and seemingly neglecting their own, the die is cast.

But although this 'rejection story' is important in the narrative it would easy and indeed wrong to miss the significance of the earlier message which Jesus delivered, his edited version of Isaiah 61. I posed the question "why did he change the text?" The answer is actually quite simple. Jesus was setting out his

mission and the nature of salvation that God is bringing through him. I mentioned earlier that Luke was based on God's redemptive work and this passage is a clear indicator of what that is.

"Good news to the poor" is in because there can be no marginalisation in God's kingdom. Release to the captives, sight to the blind and release for the oppressed all refer to those prevented by religious and social restrictions from attaining true understanding of God. But Isaiah's "day of vengeance of our God" is deliberately left out because forgiveness and the saving act of God is on offer to all.

And this is as close as we get to a mission statement from Jesus. But of course, it wasn't just words. What he taught he lived. But like every great teacher, Jesus' teaching was authoritative – Matthew 7.28 tells us that he spoke "as one having authority and not as the scribes". He was patient. Patient in encouraging people to challenge the slavish traditions rigorously policed by the scribes and Pharisees. His words "It was said by them of old...But I say unto you" with one stroke swept aside the ritual and tradition to cut through to the living God. And if you think about his teaching style, he rarely supplied answers because that is not God's way. What he did through his life, his works, his teaching and his death was to supply 'a new and living spirit by whose light and strength people could face their problems and win through.' (Stewart 1977)

But of course, for some that is not good news. The Pharisees had been tasked with keeping religion alive and uncontaminated but they the process of observance to extremes. They instinctively rejected Jesus as a threat and an impostor. How could someone who did not share their ecclesiastical tradition and culture be the Messiah? How could someone who attracted the poor and unclean be the deliverer of Israel? How can someone who suggests that God is alive and may have things to add or change to the obsolete and pedantic legislation handed down by Moses possibly understand the will of God? Orthodoxy demanded that Scripture was the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth. There was no room for challenge, reconsideration or interpretation no matter how out of date or impractical it may have become. We do it because we've always done it. Something to consider when thinking about CC2020 (our community church project)

The landowners of course were keen to maintain the status quo. They needed the lower classes to work their farms and pay their tithes. Harsh subservience and poverty was the way of life for the majority which in turn kept them rich and of course they were happy to keep it that way. The God of peace and love that Jesus revealed in his life and teaching, a God passionately interested in his children, released the oppressed from the bondage of fear and worry and gave them a peace and purpose that transcended earthly struggles. Remember Jesus words in Mark 9.36 "What shall it profit a man if he shall gain the whole world and lose his soul?". But this sort of talk was not good for business!

And a Messiah that preached love rather than war was just not acceptable to an Israel that had set its hope on a warrior king who would throw off the Roman yoke and restore Israel to its rightful position as a world leader where other nations would be subservient to their rule once more.

But is it any different today? We do not need to look very far to see examples of oppression, and poverty. Religious intolerance, racial and sexual victimisation, even slavery are all still rife throughout the world. In our own country how many more reports will our leaders dismiss that tell us how austerity has hit the poor and lower earners whilst the top earners are seen to be proportionately better off. How many more Foodbanks and overnight shelters do we need before its recognised that there may be a problem? One does not have to be a politician to see that the indecision, political posturing and game playing by our elected leaders is damaging the country, costing a fortune in monies that would be better used on helping those who need it, whilst those in real need continue to suffer from the side effects.

If you consider the advances in the last 100 years, even the changes in our own lifetimes, where previously unchallenged traditions and institutions have been broken up, where challenges to established authority have revealed corrupt and manipulative regimes, where new opportunities have been opened to ordinary people and even latterly there is painfully slow progress on the subject of women's equality, there is no doubt that we now live in an age of change. An age where it is no longer considered wrong to constructively question the morals, politics culture and even religion of our predecessors. We are slowly accepting that If we always do the same things, we will always get the same results. And it's just not good enough!

Jesus at Nazareth laid out his mission and God's saving plan for his children; "good news for the poor...release to the captives...recovery of sight to the blind...(letting) the oppressed go free".

Paul argued in 1. Corinthians 12 that the church is the body of Christ. In a few minutes we will all say the words from Romans 12.5 "we, who are many, are one body". By repeating these words, we are effectively accepting the tasks handed down by Jesus. Tasks as relevant to our contemporary world as they were 2000 years ago. Jesus taught us how this was to be done through his life, his actions, his words and his death. He taught us to actively seek answers for ourselves, to use the living spirit whose gives light, understanding and strength so that people can face their problems. We have the task, we have the role model, we certainly have all the issues. The question now is, what are we going to do about it?

Amen