

Sunday Morning Resources

Sunday 26 January 2025 - The Third Sunday of Epiphany

Lectionary Readings (depending on the kind of service you are leading, you may use one or more of the following readings – however, you **must** use the gospel reading, as this is what the homily is based on)

Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a; Luke 4.14-21

Homily

Today's homily has been written by the Revd Canon Dr Robert Mackley, Incumbent - Vicar, St Mary the Less, Cambridge

One of the things that organisations do a lot of these days is have mission statements. There was an article about Waitrose the other month that said that they had changed their mission statement to encouraging their customers to connect emotionally with their food. Obviously we all go as misty eyed as the next person at a packet of ferrero rochet, but the majority of us will find it difficult to get awfully intimate with most of the usual run of groceries. But the purpose of these secular mission statements, often seems to be getting one over on your opponent and drawing attention to yourself.

Today's Gospel is as close as Jesus gets to a mission statement. God has anointed me, chosen me, says Jesus, "to bring good news to the poor, to proclaim release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, to let the oppressed go free, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour."

It all sounds pretty impressive – here's a chap bravely getting up, reading the text confidently and applying it to himself. But actually, the event St Luke describes for us this morning is rather more significant for what it misses out than what it includes. For in fact any reasonably educated person could be invited to take part in the synagogue service and the usual pattern was to have the Shema read ('you shall love the Lord your God with all your heart', etc), followed by prayers, a fixed reading from the Torah (the first five books of the Old Testament) and then a free reading from the prophets. Jesus was simply taking part in the regular synagogue service as was his custom; and indeed, he'd been visiting a fair few Luke tells us – he'd 'begun to teach in their synagogues' synagogues plural, you'll note. Jesus was doing what a lot of Jewish men did – finding a bit of the prophets and reading from it.

But this is where it gets interesting: Jesus chooses a text from the prophet Isaiah describing the promised and long-awaited Messiah, the Saviour of the people of Israel. But he doesn't choose just one bit of Isaiah but two, the text we hear, and his first hearers heard is two bits stuck together – Isaiah 58, verse 6 and Isaiah 61 verses 1 and 2. But Jesus doesn't read the whole of verse 2, he stops halfway. For the whole of verse 2 goes like this: 'to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour,' yes, we've got that bit, but then it goes on: 'and the day of vengeance of our God'.

Jesus deliberately misses out saying that he is there to bring about God's vengeance.

This season of the church's year which we're currently in, Epiphany, is all about revealing, manifesting, who the Babe in the manger at Christmas actually is. The visit of the wise men tells us that he is for gentiles, that he is king, priest and victim; the baptism tells us and him that he is God's Son; and today we discover that he is the Messiah. 'This scripture,' this Messianic prophecy, says Jesus, 'is fulfilled in your hearing'. Literally, in the Greek, 'in your ears'.

But we discover that he is not to be a Messiah who is going to go and get the enemies of the people of Israel. He is not going to be on their side in any conventional sense of the phrase. In his baptism, we hear of God's delight and pleasure, and today we hear the counterpart to that, we hear of God's refusal of vengeance. How much must his hearers, oppressed under the Roman Empire, have longed for a warrior to sally forth and defeat their occupiers; how much must we sometimes wish that God would just come and get rid of those people and situations which annoy us. In the Old Testament, God tells the Israelites not to exact vengeance, for vengeance is mine he says. Now in the new, having taken vengeance away from his people, he reveals that he will have no part in vengeance either. The cycle of violence, which so afflicts the Holy Land, Syria, Lebanon, Ukraine and a good number of our own relationships, the cycle of tit for tat and who we're not speaking to – this cycle has no part to play in the mission statement of Jesus Christ.

But there's something else that is sort of missed out of our gospel. Jesus finishes reading, hands the scroll back to the hazzan, the attendant, and sits down, his job done. He didn't read it and immediately say to them 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'. He doesn't wait for attention; he doesn't expect all eyes to be on him. He may not have been intending to preach or say anything. He just sits down. And then, St Luke tells us, all eyes were gazing, fixed on him and after realising this, may be waiting, Jesus finally speaks – 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing'.

Bizarrely, given that this is all about him, Jesus is not seeking to be the centre of attention. He goes to church, gets up to read as any reasonably educated Jew would and then resumes his seat. In Luke's Gospel he's just come back from the wilderness where he was tempted by traditional Jewish ideas of what the Messiah would be like or do. Perhaps this is one more temptation – and how very modern a temptation it is: to be the centre of attention, to be the famous celebrity. All eyes are gazing at him.

Yet in speaking those words, choosing them carefully as he did, he does have an effect on his listeners. As we hear elsewhere in the Gospels, 'he spoke as one with authority'. To have something to say, to be a person of authority, to speak out, is always a danger; a danger that we place ourselves at the centre, that everyone and everything must revolve around us. And if it doesn't, we either get depressed or we get violent, we long for the day of vengeance of our God.

Yet even Christ, in whom and through whom and for whom all things exist; Jesus, the still point of the turning universe – even he treads cautiously today. And surely it is his very

humility, his turning from celebrity and violence, it is all this that means that 2,000 years on we can still hear those same words: 'Today, this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

Wondering Questions: Some wondering questions that may help to engage all generations to ponder and explore during the talk, service or during the week may include (three or so) of the following style of questions:

- I wonder what your favourite part of the story/passage is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder who your favourite character is? I wonder why that is?
- I wonder how _____ felt or I wonder how _____ felt when _____ happened?
- I wonder how you feel about _____?
- I wonder where you are in this story?
- I wonder what part of the story is about you?
- I wonder what the [tree, pearl, coin] could really be?
- I wonder why _____ said _____?
- I wonder what we can learn about God in this story?

Suggested intercessions

In the power of the Spirit and in union with Christ, let us pray to the Father:

'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me because he has anointed me to preach good news.' For the Church, for Dagmar, Acting Bishop of Ely, for all who call upon the name of Jesus: that the Spirit of the Lord may come mightily upon us that we can proclaim and be good news for the world.

Lord, hear us...

'He has sent me to proclaim release to the captives, to set at liberty those who are oppressed.' For the world and for all who are in prison, for those who are political prisoners, for all in thrall to addictions and violence, for all who are oppressed by dictatorship or autocracy: that Jesus Christ the Prince of Peace may deliver them from their captors, let us pray.

Lord, hear us...

'He has anointed me to preach good news to the poor and recovering of sight to the blind.' For those who are in any kind of distress; for the sick and suffering; for those in poverty; for any whom we name now...: that Jesus would pour upon them the balm of his healing love, let us pray.

Lord, hear us...

'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' For the dying and all who long for the release promised by the scriptures; for the faithful departed that they may find the fulfilment of their earthly lives now in Jesus in heaven; for the consummation of all things, that evil may depart, and goodness may reign, let us pray.

Lord, hear us...

Fixing the eyes of our hearts on Jesus and uniting ourselves with every Christian on earth and in heaven, let us commend all things to his Father and ours as we pray:

Merciful Father...

Suggested hymns/songs

All numbers are from the New English Hymnal:

451 Songs of praise the angels sang

366 God of mercy, God of grace

55 Hail to the Lord's anointed

41 Where is this stupendous stranger

483 The Church of God a kingdom is

425 O love how deep, how broad, how high

360 Firmly I believe and truly

361 Forth in the peace of Christ we go

Activities to accompany the service:

If you are looking for resources to accompany the service for engaging younger children, then there are lots of online resources. The following free to access/download resources may be useful starting points:

- <https://flamecreativekids.blogspot.com/>
- <https://www.pinterest.co.uk/MessyChurchBRF/>
- <https://www.faithinkids.org/>
- [reflectionary.org](https://www.reflectionary.org/) – lectionary-based resources
- [engageworship](https://www.engageworship.com/) – in particular 'Area 52' for lectionary-based material
- <https://www.bdeducation.org.uk/product-category/primary-age-5-11/>
(weekly@lectionary resource)