

Sermon for 27th January, 2019 Third Sunday after Epiphany.

To put today's gospel story in context:

Jesus had been baptised by John in the river Jordan and after his baptism was led out into the wilderness for 40 days and nights where he was tempted by the devil.

He then returned to Galilee, and filled with the Spirit he began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone.

Today's gospel passage is set at the beginning of Jesus ministry in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth where he is handed the scroll and he reads from the prophet Isaiah: *The Spirit of the Lord has been given to me, for he has anointed me. He has sent me to bring the good news to the poor, to proclaim liberty to captives, and to the blind give new sight, to set the downtrodden free, and to proclaim the Lord's year of favour.* He then says: *Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.*

The word *today* in this context, should not be taken as a reference to the historical 'today' of Jesus' time, suggests theologian Robert Karris, rather, the reference is to the 'today' of the present time of all time.¹

In other words, the time of fulfilment in Christ is as fresh and life giving in the today of the present time as it was back in the synagogue at Nazareth in the first century.

This is an important insight that, I believe we need to hear often so that the reality of it never dulls in our hearts and minds – for it brings hope that feeds every age when it experiences its own difficulties and challengers even though they can be remarkably similar.

When we look at the way of the world in Jesus time we see that it is very much about division - about those who were in and those who were out. In Jesus time social identities matter immensely. There are fierce quarrels about who is on the inside and who is on the outer. It is a world in which knowing exactly where you stand is of great importance. Inside or out? A citizen or a migrant? A free person or a slave? A Jew or a Gentile? A man or a woman? It is a world where the lines are deeply etched and there is very little possibility of crossing them, a world filled with the complexities of identity.

Not much different from the today of the present time really.

A time when we seek to build walls to concrete the division between race or creed, a time of Brexit when a solution is sought to exit an existing agreement of unity that for some has never worked well enough. And closer to home in our own nation a time of debate about who is in and who is out.

What Jesus is saying in the synagogue at Nazareth at the beginning of his ministry is that God's fidelity to the promise of fulfilment applies in a fresh and life giving way to the today of every age.

The first reading from Nehemiah is a public proclamation of the Book of the Law in the assembly by Ezra, the scribe. The people were told not to weep or be mournful, but to rejoice for the joy of the Lord is your stronghold.

This is reinforced in the psalm: The law of the Lord revives the soul... The precepts of the Lord... gladden the heart... The command of the Lord... gives light to the eyes. This understanding of the Law of God is that of a life-giving word, something alive and active.

¹ Robert J. Karris, O.F.M. "The Gospel According to Luke" in *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, Geoffrey Chapman: London 1993. P 690.

And it is this joy, light and life that is part of the fulfilment in Christ that Jesus proclaims at the beginning of his public ministry at the synagogue at Nazareth.

What fulfilment means in real terms is that a new way of belonging with God and with one another is now here. It is what we hear described in great detail in the 1st letter to the Corinthians. A letter written by the apostle Paul - someone who knows personally that the barriers come down in Christ. In Corinth we see this is action, at work in the community as the body of Christ. And just as a human body, though it is made up of many parts, is a single unit because all these parts, though many, make one body, so it is with Christ.

In the one Spirit we were all baptised, Jews as well as Greeks, slaves as well as citizens, and one Spirit was given to us all to drink. Nor is the body to be identified with any one of its many parts... for together we are Christ's body; with each part retaining the dignity of its uniqueness.

Christian giving is therefore not a matter of haves being kind to have-nots but of all recognizing that each are valued and depend on each other.

This is way of it – the way of fulfilment in Jesus Christ.

So as one body we in our Christian community at Grovely parish are called to be the body of Christ and as we all depend upon each other in the dignity of our own uniqueness we gladly offer our giftedness and gifts as the body of Christ.

Today we are all invited to ponder how we can become, or continue as part of the body of Christ in our parish so that we each have a purpose that makes the body function in a wholesome way in the present time and into the future time. My prayer is that we will continue on this path of unity knowing that we all have something to contribute and that God's mission in this parish will continue to grow and look outward, to bring good news to the poor and to set the captives free.

The Lord be with you