

Message for Sunday, 3rd February, 2019

(Jeremiah 1:4-10, Ps 71:1-6, 1Corinthians 13:1-13, Luke 4:21-30)

¹⁸“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, ¹⁹to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favor.” ²⁰And he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down.

You might think I’ve mixed up my weeks as this portion of scripture was part of the gospel passage we heard last week. No, it is that these words immediately precede our reading for today and I think it is important for us to hear it again for it helps to put today’s passage into context.

This text that Jesus reads is an interweaving of two texts from Third Isaiah, the prophet who had proclaimed a joyful, abundant salvation to the exiled community of Israel. With these words, Jesus affirms to his own people that he is the one bringing salvation and release from their suffering.

Unlike Mark and Matthew, Luke places Jesus preaching in his home town of Nazareth at the very beginning of his public ministry. It occurs in the synagogue during the Sabbath service, ‘where any adult male could read, preach and open the discussion’ (2).

And when, as we hear in the Gospel reading for this morning, Jesus states that ‘today this scripture has been fulfilled’ he is drawing on Jewish tradition in which it was understood that all Jews were part of the salvation that had been offered in the Exodus and throughout their history. Writer and nun, Kym Harris explains that this now comes to its full revelation and release in the person of Jesus.

And Jesus makes it clear just what type of anointed one he would be. He would offer the ‘acceptance of God’ to all people, especially to those who were oppressed – the poor, the hungry and the sick. (2)

Initially the people in Jesus’ hometown of Nazareth were amazed at the gracious words he spoke; but then, we are told, someone reminded everyone that this was a hometown boy, the son of Joseph.

Where does this wisdom come from they wondered? They had heard of the deeds of healing that he had done in Capernaum. They expected to see similar deeds. After all, this was his hometown. Surely he should take care of his own!

Jesus makes the point in a very direct manner, one might say confrontationally, that God is not only concerned for those on the inside; those who considered themselves ‘chosen’ by God.

In fact, it appears that God seeks out those who might be considered 'outsiders' – and Jesus names examples of times in Israel's history where God's blessing appears to have favoured widows, the poor, the hungry, the unwell, not within Israel, but from other Gentile communities.

Those listening to Jesus didn't like what they were hearing and were so enraged that they wanted to hurl him off a cliff. It seems that the behaviour of human beings was not so very different in the time of Jesus from what is seen all too often today.

How often do we close our ears to messages we don't like and don't want to hear. We are often not very good at being open to messages that upset the norm - our usual way of being. As followers of Christ, we might be forgiven for wanting God's blessing to be about us. Jesus confronts us with the truth that God's favour, God's blessing is for all.

Author, poet and priest, John O'Donohue writes that 'the beauty of blessing is that it recognizes no barriers – and no distances. All the given frontiers of blockage that separate and distance us can be penetrated by the loving subtlety of blessing. This can be the key to awakening and creating forgiveness. We often linger in the crippling states of anger and resentment.'

Often it is words spoken in truth that cause us to feel anger and resentment, exactly as the good people of Nazareth felt when Jesus spoke to them in the synagogue. Jesus was not afraid to speak plainly, to speak the truth even when those words were not what the people wanted to hear.

In many ways the scripture spoken by Jesus can be considered a mandate for his life. In the words we remember Jesus saying and in the things he is remembered doing, 'Jesus clearly sought to link the meaning of the words found in Isaiah with the religious and political realities of his time'.

The same can be said of our reading from Paul. These most beautiful words are often referred to as a hymn; words that many of us will be very familiar with, (often chosen to be read at weddings).

"Love is patient; love is kind; love is not envious or boastful or arrogant or rude. It does not insist on its own way; it is not irritable or resentful; it does not rejoice in wrong-doing, but rejoices in the truth. It bears all things, believes all things, hopes all things, endures all things. Love never ends."

The Greek word for love used here is *agape* and it is filled with a sense of love that confers value on its object which may otherwise be quite unlovable.

New Testament scholars, Paul Achtemeier et al, when writing about Paul's letter states that 'God's love for human beings confers value on human beings otherwise made quite unlovable by sin'. This love, love that gives us value, in spite of our shortcomings is what Paul describes here.

Paul's letter to the people of Corinth was written in an effort to mediate between differing factions within that early Christian community. The Corinthian Christians had divided themselves into quarreling factions in an attempt to align themselves with whoever they considered the most powerful Christian figure and there was much disagreement about how they should live their lives. This community lived with division and Paul's epistle was an effort on his part to interpret Jesus teachings and offer advice to clarify the issues.

It seems that in Jesus time, as in the time of Paul and even further back in the time of the prophet Jeremiah (our OT reading for today), there was division – those on the inside (who considered themselves to be God's chosen people) and those on the outer who were not.

In our world today we are no stranger to the kind of division that Jesus confronts. We have only to think of ongoing problems in politics in the U.S., the United Kingdom and the EU, Venezuela to name just a few of the current issues for our times. Closer to home, we can look to the current Royal Commission into the Aged Care Sector and certainly the Royal Commission into Child Abuse. Really the list goes on.

Choosing respect instead of insult, acceptance instead of rejection, love over hate, peace instead of conflict, truth rather than deception is not an easy road, even though we might wish it were so.

I recently read an article written by Christian scholar Karoline Lewis about a trip to the Holy Land where she attended a presentation by the Parent's Circle, which is an organisation for Palestinians and Israelis who have lost loved ones in the conflict.

She says that

The representatives who spoke were two fathers, a Palestinian and an Israeli, who had both lost daughters because of the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestine. There was a very honest discussion about the conflict and about life before and after the Separation Wall. "No wall, no matter how high, can stop two kinds of people, one a determined suicide bomber and one the determined peacemaker," said one of the fathers.

They each went through their own moments of wondering how life could possibly carry on given the deaths of their children due to such senseless, mindless fighting. They could have chosen revenge to ease their pain but instead realized that the only way forward was to talk to each other.

In each other, they found the way to carry on because, in their words, “our blood is the same color, our tears are just as bitter.” They found a way to carry on that chose peace instead of revenge, conversation instead of fear, life instead of death.....’

This is the gospel that Jesus preached – a gospel of inclusion – a God of love for each and every one of us. A Gospel that at times speaks a truth that can be difficult for us to hear, let alone practice. But Jesus understands our human frailties. It is in the redeeming love of God that we live and breath and have our being.

Blessings of Peace be with each one of us this day. Amen

Acknowledgements:

- 1 Paul J Actemeier et al, *Introducing the New Testament*
- 2 Sr Kym Harris, *Pray as you Can*
- 3 Karoline M. Lewis, *John: Fortress Biblical Preaching Commentaries*
- 4 John O’Donohue, *Benedictus, A Book of Blessing*