

Sermon

'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing ' (Luke 4:21 NRSV)

From time to time as a preacher you get invitations to preach at other churches and sometimes you get invited to preach in a church where you have grown up and they know you very well and it's always difficult to preach to people you know well. Somehow there are the expectations of the local girl made good.

So, Jesus returns to the synagogue, where he has spent his boyhood. It is a good opportunity for people to see him again and a chance for the people to catch up on the news- to find out what he has been up to and hear what he has to say.

Jesus is the invited preacher for the day. He stands up and reads the words of the prophet Isaiah - The Spirit is upon me, Jesus says, he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor, proclaim release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and to let the oppressed go free.

Then Jesus points to himself as the fulfilment of the ancient prophecy : today the text becomes true in the hearing of his own townspeople. At first their reaction is approval of his word but then they remind themselves of his identity and say ' Is not this Joseph's son? '

The neighbours don't allow Jesus' wisdom to interfere with their memories of him. When he presents himself to them for the first time as the prophetic preacher, they remind themselves of his address and pedigree. They won't allow Jesus to grow up so they lock him into the past and into a former identity.

Perhaps the neighbours have a vested interest in focusing on who Jesus was to them, rather than who he is now. It's much easier having a carpenter around the house than a prophet; it is much easier talking about broken chairs rather than broken lives. They want to keep Jesus at the level they can handle ; they want to keep him reasonably harmless.

Jesus reminds them that no prophet is accepted in his own homeland, and as if to prove him right the local crowd become so enraged that they try to throw him off a cliff. But Jesus escapes and it is no surprise that he never returns home again.

Story - The film 'Billy Elliott' tells the story of Billy who grows up in a mining town in the northeast when the mining strikes were at their height in the 1970's. Everyone in that town is expected to be a miner - especially the young lad Billy. But Billy develops a love of ballet much to the disgust of his father and his family who put all sorts of obstacles in his way.

You can't possibly become a dancer - they say - it's not the thing to do. It's not what we expect. They fail to listen to what he's saying, but one person does hear the desires of his heart - a local teacher who sees his potential and trains him and works with him with the result that eventually he goes for an interview for a place at the Royal Ballet School in Covent Garden London.

After Billy has danced in front of the examiners and he is about to leave the room, the examiner asks him what he feels like when he dances - 'I feel like a bird - free -it's like something possesses me and I can't stop dancing. I come alive. ' This energy possesses him drives him on to fulfill the vision that has been given to him, the vision that has grown within him and changed his life, but which his own folk find difficult to accept.

So in our gospel reading to day we hear of Jesus, anointed and possessed by the power of the holy Spirit who drives him on to fulfil the vision that God has given to him through the prophets. For these words of Isaiah are in effect Jesus' manifesto for his life and ministry, words which grow within him and change his life and change the lives of those who will listen and respond.

In our hearing and our understanding of God's word it comes alive and becomes fulfilled here and now. And what a word it is!

It is a word of good news for the poor - not just for those who have empty wallets but those who have an empty soul. It is a word of liberation for those who are bound and captive - things in their own lives which imprison them and from which they dare to break free. It is a word of freedom for the oppressed - for those who feel weighed down by the burdens which stifle human potential and creativity.

And at the heart of this passage and the heart of the good news itself is the promise of the recovery of vision. Our recovery of vision allows us to become a people called to proclaim to everyone what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ. This recovery of vision enables us and the whole world to perceive, or see the glory of God's marvellous works.

But to become those people who respond to God readily we have to have ears that are attentive to God's Holy Spirit by getting to know Jesus as the one who offers us good news, who sets us free, and gives us eyes of faith to see the world through God's eyes.

Story - Conference led by John Drane and his wife Olive on storytelling. Olive told her story of the moment when after having lost a child and in her grief, God gave her a vision of being involved in clown ministry to reach people with the gospel. What would people say about an academic theologian married to a clown: Olive wrestled with God on the issue but she remained faithful to that vision.

For she realised that God had blessed her and as she was telling this story she was donning her clown's costume and came to the point where she put on her clown's face with the paint above and below her eyes - forming the shape of a cross.

Vision is about seeing the world through the eyes of the cross she said - as she demonstrated so powerfully and then invited people to come from the hall to have a cross painted on various parts of the body. So a teacher stepped forward (cross on mouth from which I speak words to my pupils) and a doctor came next to have cross painted on the hands that heal his patients - every one of them - wanting to see the world through the eyes of the cross.

Our recovery of vision allows us to become a people called to proclaim what it means to be disciples of Jesus Christ, to see the world through God's eyes. But to become those people who respond to God readily, we have to be attentive to His word, to interpret and discuss that word with one another so that we can understand just what God is calling us to do, individually and as a community of God's people.

Jesus has to leave home to become the person his Father wants him to be. He can't rely on his own folks to foster his new life and new mission. So he establishes a community - a body of people, who will recognise as St. Paul says, their need of each other.

To become those people who respond to God readily we need to be part of Christ's body here on earth - that is the fellowship of the church, with each one of us having a crucial role to play as part of his body. A community of God's people pledged to support the growing life of the Spirit in each person and to live out the vision God has given us even if at times, we may be misunderstood.

For there is a sense in which the manifesto of Jesus' ministry has to be embodied within the life of those called by His name and it challenges us at every level - both personally and corporately.

Is the Spirit of God blessing my ministry? In what ways are we bringing the good news to the poor - physically and spiritually? How do we offer freedom to those who are enslaved by so many things? and are there things in our own lives of which we need to let go and receive that grace of Christ which sets us free?

How may we as people of the gospel enable one another in our church and community to grow in spiritual sight and to announce in our own time and place that the time has come when the Lord will save his people.

As we have shared in this service this morning maybe we have been challenged to think about this Jesus — who is he for me — how does he affect my life, my work, my relationships — am I guilty of wanting to keep Jesus at the level I can handle him?

As we have shared in this service, may be we have been challenged to think about the mission which shaped Jesus' ministry and how it could shape the character of the church in which we are called to serve

All the people in the synagogue have their eyes fixed on Jesus as he says to them, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' So may God's Word come alive in us that His presence may be seen and heard in the world. Thanks be to God.