

Sermon for Sunday 26 January 2025

Third Sunday of Epiphany

Nehemiah 8: 1 – 3, 5 – 6, 8 – 10; 1 Corinthians 12: 12 – 31a; Luke 4: 14 – 21

Jesus' Manifesto – Liberation for all

I've been thinking about what to say this morning with several recent events in my mind – the inauguration of President Trump at the beginning of this week, and the videos of Israeli hostages and Palestinian prisoners being released. Our Gospel reading provides interesting reflection on both.

In very few words, Luke records very vividly this extraordinary moment. We almost feel we were there. Jesus has been baptised, and has returned from his time of temptation in the wilderness and started out on a ministry of teaching in the synagogues of Galilee. It's all going really well. And now he arrives at his home town - Nazareth – his local synagogue where he must have been known from his childhood. (Luke's brief account, incidentally, is the earliest known description of

synagogue worship.) Jesus stands up to read what would have probably been the second reading, from the scroll of the prophet Isaiah. We can't be sure, but it reads as if he chose to read this passage, rather than having it chosen for him. He reads, sits down, then simply says, 'Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' (Luke 4:21).

What a sermon! What a moment – What a claim - to have fulfilled Scripture!

We didn't exactly get a manifesto from Donald Trump on his inauguration, but we did get a fairly good idea of what his priorities are and how he views his role as President. This is Jesus' manifesto. It tells us who he is and what he has come to do. It tells us Jesus is God's anointed one, the Messiah. He comes with good news. News of liberation, of release. This news is for the poor, for captives, for the blind, for the oppressed. And he comes to declare the year of the Lord's favour, a time of acceptance for those who will respond to God's invitation.

Just before Christmas we looked at Mary's Song, the Magnificat, in our Advent groups, (Luke 1: 46 – 55). Jesus' words in our Gospel today echo what she says there. They are also similar to the Beatitudes (Luke 6: 20 – 26). This is an important message. So what is it?

The good news Jesus proclaims is first for our hearts. He offers liberation from the sin which so easily entangles us, draws our focus away from God and encourages us to put other things or people in place of God. Through his death on the Cross and his resurrection, Jesus has defeated the power of sin and its consequence, which is death. If we place our trust in Jesus, we are no longer captives, but free to live as citizens of God's kingdom. Jesus came to set us all free to live as God intended.

We've probably all seen the weariness, the tension and the final joy on the faces of those hostages and prisoners who have been released in recent weeks. Once they are freed they can be reunited with those they love and take up their lives again.

That is the joy of release. But for what, I wonder, will they use that freedom? For what, I wonder do we use the freedom that Jesus has bought us on the Cross?

Freedom always comes with responsibilities. And we have in Jesus' words here some ideas of what those responsibilities might be. Isaiah's words which Jesus quotes link back to God the Father's principles for justice, and especially for protecting the poor, the oppressed and the marginalised. These principles had been laid down for God's people hundreds of years before the birth of Jesus. Deuteronomy (15) and Leviticus (25) give clear rules for the way they are to treat one another. Every 7th year was to be a Sabbath year. The land was to be left fallow, all debts were to be cancelled, and slaves were to be freed; the needy were to be treated with generosity. Every 50th year was a year of Jubilee, a kind of re-set to zero where everyone returned to their original property, all slaves were released and financial equality between all of God's people was to be re-established. No one was to be unduly rich or unduly poor.

Sadly, God's people never managed to live fully according to these principles. But this shows us the pattern God's desire for humanity – for us to live together without extremes of wealth and poverty, caring especially for the weak and the poor. That same desire is also behind Jesus' words as he steps up to read in the synagogue.

Going back to the inauguration of President Trump. He certainly did proclaim liberation for some, but perhaps at the expense of others. And to be fair, most political regimes favour some people and causes over others. None of this is easy to solve. But, as followers of Jesus, we have our responsibility to do what we can to bring about his kingdom. That means not just telling others about Jesus, but working, as we can, for a juster, kinder world, and doing what we can to help those who are in need.

Jesus rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. Everyone was watching him. Then he said 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' I imagine there was a stunned

silence before people began to respond. In the end they tried to lynch him.

How are we going to respond to Jesus' manifesto of liberation – first for our hearts, and then for all of humanity?

Amen

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