

## **Sermon Jesus College Chapel: I Samuel 16:1-13; Luke 4:14-21**

I'm not entirely certain of my ground in this, but I think I can claim to know which is the shortest sermon in the Bible. It's actually considerably shorter than this sermon is going to be! It only consists of eight words in English. You'll find it in our NT reading, from the fourth chapter of St. Luke's gospel. Brief though it may be, we know it's a sermon because Jesus deliberately sits down to say these words – and in the synagogue, where he was speaking, whilst you stood up to read the scriptures, you sat down to preach. This simple sermon follows straight on from Jesus' reading from the prophet Isaiah in the synagogue of his hometown, Nazareth. He stood up to read from the scroll, but then he sat down to preach. And this is what he said; this is his sermon, in full: 'Today,' he said, 'this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.'

In what sense exactly were Isaiah's words fulfilled that day in Nazareth? What, in other words, did Jesus' sermon *mean*? To answer those questions we need to hear the historical echoes that Isaiah's words would have set up in the minds of Jesus' hearers. There are three particular echoes that we need to hear ourselves if we're to understand what's going on here.

The first echo we need to hear is an echo of the Exile. What Isaiah was announcing in the passage Jesus read was the end of the Exile. The poor, the captives, the oppressed, the people in need of saving, were the exiles who had been forcibly deported from Israel and taken to Babylon in the late 6<sup>th</sup> century BC. For the exiles Isaiah's words were words of promise: the promise of freedom and of liberation.

Now the exiles did indeed come home just as Isaiah prophesied. And yet to many in Jesus' day the Exile was still continuing. Yes, they were back in the land, but no, they were not free, not while they were subject to Roman rule. Judea was perhaps the most rebellious of all Roman provinces, because the people of Israel were still longing for the end of exile and were not afraid to take action to bring the Exile to an end. So Jesus is speaking not just about an historical situation, but is using Isaiah's words to address a very contemporary problem.

The second echo we need to hear is one that takes us back beyond the Exile, beyond Isaiah, way back to Leviticus chapter 25 and the rules for the year of Jubilee; that year when according to the law debts would be cancelled and slaves released: a year in other words of freedom and of liberation. When Isaiah talks about the year of Jubilee, which he refers to as 'the year of the Lord's favour', he's taking the idea of the Jubilee, a concept redolent with

these ideas of freedom and liberation, and applying it to the end of the Exile. 'That', he's saying, 'will be your time of Jubilee: when the Lord sets you free and brings you home.'

Now the year of Jubilee was never actually practised in Old Testament history: perhaps its challenges were just too great. It remained, however, a powerful symbol for the people in Jesus' day. The first thing the rebels did in the Jewish War in AD66 was to burn the Treasury. Why? Because that's where the records of debt were kept. It wasn't just an act of vandalism: they saw their actions as being all of a piece with the year of Jubilee: the year of liberation. It was a sign of freedom. So Jesus is speaking about an ancient concept that nonetheless has powerful contemporary relevance. Just as people were waiting for the end of the Exile, so they were waiting too for the year of Jubilee: the year of the Lord's favour, the year of the Lord's liberation.

And finally although these are the words of Isaiah, they are really the words of the Messiah. That's the third echo we need to hear: the echo of the promise of Messiah. Jesus says, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has **anointed** me.' The word translated 'anointed' is directly related to the word 'Christ' which is simply the Greek word for 'Messiah', or anointed one. So when Jesus says 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me,' he could just as well have said 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has **Messiah-ed** me.' The agenda that Jesus is announcing, of salvation, of healing, of freedom and of liberation, is the agenda of no less a person than the Lord's Messiah: the anointed one of God; the Christ; the one on whom his Spirit rests.

So when Jesus reads Isaiah's words these three ideas crowd together: of the end of exile; of release for the captives and cancellation of debts; and of the coming of the Messiah. And then Jesus says, v. 21 'Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.' And in this very short sermon Jesus takes these three powerful ideas from the past and focuses them on the present; he focuses them, in fact, on himself. When he read the words, 'The Spirit of the Lord is upon **me**,' he wasn't just reading Isaiah's words; he was reading a script prepared for him centuries before. Without a shadow of a doubt in his sermon Jesus is saying that *he* is the Messiah; through *him* the exile will end and in *him* the year of Jubilee will come. He's saying, 'I am the one you've been waiting for; I'm the one through whom God's promised liberation and freedom is going to come.' Here, and now, it's happening.

Now there is something quite amazing about the words of this very short sermon. On the one hand Jesus focuses these powerful images of liberation, rescue and transformation

exclusively on himself. And in one way they can only apply to him. It is Jesus alone who is the anointed one, who brings freedom and liberation. In terms of Luke 4 we are not the anointed ones: we, rather, are the poor who have had good news preached to us; we are the prisoners who have had freedom proclaimed to us; we are the blind who have received our sight and the oppressed who have been freed; we live in the year of the Lord's favour. The scripture Jesus read in the synagogue in Nazareth has been fulfilled therefore not only in the ears of his hearers. That scripture has been fulfilled in the life of every Christian, through everything that Jesus the Messiah, the anointed one of God, has done for us.

In one way those words of Isaiah can only apply to Jesus. And yet, and yet... Because of all that Jesus has done for us those words *become* ours as well. Because of his victory on the cross, because of the triumph of his resurrection, because of his gift at Pentecost those words can apply to us too, as we too are anointed by the Spirit, to do the very works that Jesus did, in the power of his Spirit. Just as David was anointed in the Spirit by Samuel, in our OT reading, so 'great David's greater Son' is anointed too – and so too are those who seek to follow him as his disciples. We too are anointed by the same Spirit. His call becomes our call too. Through Jesus, because of Jesus, in the power of his Spirit, Jesus' mission becomes our mission.

We in Church Mission Society exist to help God's people hear and heed God's call to mission. Our vision is to see all God's people engaged in God's mission, bringing challenge, change, hope and freedom to the world. Our vision of what mission looks like in today's world is very broad. Our founders were not only passionate about global mission; they were also the leading lights in the campaign to abolish the slave trade. So their conception of the work of mission, of the work of the Kingdom of God was broad, not narrow: as broad indeed as Isaiah and Jesus' vision: a vision of good news proclaimed to the poor; of prisoners released, of the blind receiving their sight; of liberation for the oppressed.

And we share that same broad vision of mission today. We still send mission partners to many parts of the world, often on the margins, engaging in work that is inherently risky. The day I wrote this sermon we received a message from one of mission partners in S. Sudan who we'd not heard of for some days, and she wrote this: *There is a war on somewhere in the bush near us. We have seen fighter jets and I know soldiers are dying but I know nothing else. I have come to the catholic mission to use their v-sat. We are totally dependent on God. So we are more than OK. I am not finding it difficult to be encouraging. The Holy Spirit is with us. I hear there's a plane coming next week. Hopefully I'll ring from there. Love to all.*

But our vision of mission is broad, and in today's world mission cannot be a matter simply of sending people and resources from the west to the rest, from the global north to the global south: there needs to be proper reciprocity in mission: the humility to receive as well as to give. So we in CMS want to be at the forefront of welcoming and receiving the gifts of the global church into the western context, and mobilising and equipping the church for mission 'over here' as well as 'over there'. Mission in today's world rightly takes many forms as we express the many passions and commitments Jesus demonstrated that day in Nazareth.

Mission takes many forms: but every Christian is called, equipped, enabled and anointed for mission. Because of all that Jesus has done for us we too are anointed by the same Spirit, to do the very works that Jesus did, in the power of his Spirit. That call will look different for each of us, but if you think Church Mission Society can help you obey your God-given calling at any time in the future then we would love to hear from you.

This call to mission is a call for all. Through Jesus, because of Jesus, in the power of his Spirit, Jesus mission becomes our mission too. And as Jesus' *call* is our call too, so his *words* can become our words too. So I invite you, whatever your own calling may look like, whether or not you know what that calling may be, to make Jesus' call your own, and to join with me in silence in making Jesus' words your own this evening:

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon us,  
because he has anointed us  
to proclaim good news to the poor.  
He has sent us to proclaim freedom for the prisoners  
and recovery of sight for the blind,  
to set the oppressed free;  
he has called us to proclaim the year  
of the Lord's favour.”

Amen.