

Luke 4: 14-21

When I am teaching the Bishop's Certificate course, there are some sessions that focus on the Gospels. These sessions have the potential to be very challenging, because they often reveal details about the Gospel accounts that we might not have noticed before. Sometimes it can be easy to have assumptions about what the Bible says, but when we look a bit closer we realise that there is more to be discovered than we previously thought.

Let's consider the story we hear today from the Gospel of St. Luke. We are told that Jesus, "full of the Holy Spirit" has returned to his home town in Galilee after being out in the desert for 40 days following His baptism. Of course, while He was out in the desert He was tempted by Satan, and that story is really about Jesus coming to terms with who He is, and what His ministry is going to be all about. So, the first thing that Jesus does after this, is to go back to His home region where He starts to teach in the synagogues.

When He gets to His home town of Nazareth, He decides to read a particular passage from the Book of Isaiah. Now like I said, Jesus's encounter with Satan in the desert has helped Jesus to clarify who He is, the Son of God, and what this is going to mean for Jesus in His ministry. The passage that Jesus chooses to read from is something of a manifesto; it's a description of the ministry that Jesus is about start.

It says this,

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,
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.

We then hear that every eye was fixed on Him. You can imagine the scene: not a sound, you could hear a penny drop. And Jesus tells them that this prophecy is now going to fulfilled in His ministry.

But what is going to fulfilled? What is actually being said here?

The first thing is that Jesus affirms that the Spirit of the Lord is with Him, that He is the Lord's anointed, the Messiah that everyone has been waiting for. He affirms that He comes with a message of good news. This is not a prophecy of doom, that the land is about to be invaded and plundered or anything like that. The message is good.

But who is that message for?

Is it for the religious leaders? Is it for the wealthy merchants or the politicians? Is it for the famous and the powerful?

Well, not quite.

We hear that this message is for the poor. It is for those in captivity, for those who are blind, for those who are oppressed. And although Jesus is reading this from the Book of Isaiah, which I think we can assume the people would have been fairly familiar with, this is not what the people were expecting to hear. In fact, this is the opposite of what the people wanted to hear. If you read on in the story, you hear about how the crowds try to grab Jesus and throw Him off a cliff, but He is able to avoid them.

So instead of hearing these words as 'good news', the crowd hears these words and reacts with violent even murderous rage. How dare God be interested in outcasts and poor people? There was a strong vein of opinion in the ancient world that poor people and disabled people were being punished for their sins, that they deserved the miserable lives they had. But here Jesus turns that on its head. Rather than the poor, the outcast, the disabled and imprisoned being the ones we pity or despise, they are the ones that God sends good news to. They are the ones that God is interested in.

This can be difficult to hear for us today. Does it mean that God is not interested in anyone who is not poor, or disabled or oppressed? I don't think that is true. But it challenges us to rethink how we approach our discipleship. Think of the story of the lost sheep – the 99 are safe within the fold, while the shepherd heads out to find the one that is lost. The 99 are safe. They are safe within the fold. But the Lord is not here, the Lord is out there, looking for the lost.

We are challenged to rethink what we understand about God's priorities, and the gospel asks us to make these priorities our own.

Well, how often do we notice the poor? How often do we think about those who are persecuted and oppressed? God notices them. God thinks about them. That is the ministry that Jesus came to live and die for. And that is the ministry we are asked to participate in.

Amen