

SERMON – 23 JANUARY 2022 – 1 COR 12.12-31a, LUKE 4.14-21



In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

We're working our way through Luke's gospel throughout this year – and we need to remember that the gospels are exciting stories, exciting stories about real people. We have a 30 year old carpenter, who has always known he is destined for something else – and now that something else is starting. Last week we had his first miracle – water into wine at a wedding in Cana. I love the way that that miracle takes place in normal village life, a wedding, we know about weddings. There are Jesus and his 12 disciples – and it must have been the sort of wedding reception where they could easily fit another 13 in – and Jesus produces a huge amount of wine. It must have been quite a party!



And here's another story from the start of Jesus' ministry – we don't actually know whether this happened before or after the wedding, and that doesn't matter. We have different stories from the different gospels, and I do encourage you to do more than just listen to the stories for a couple of minutes every Sunday. Sit and read the stories, spend time finding out more. If you need some help, or want encouragement to study together, please ask.

Jesus has been baptised, so one assumes he is on a spiritual high. He came to his cousin John the Baptist, a man who had a prophetic ministry. In Judaism, there was (there is) a tradition of prophets. Men (a few women, but mainly men) who had spoken the word of God, who had proclaimed the word of God, who were known to be God's messengers. Most of them, all of them, had been different – again, read the stories – for example, Jeremiah used the work of a potter as an illustration of the work of God, God the potter, creating from the clay, making, and destroying. (I was trying to remember which Old Testament prophet it was

who was the potter, so I typed “prophet potter” into google, and got the Daily Prophet reporting on Harry Potter).



John the Baptist was in this prophet tradition. You’ll remember his parents were old, his father was a priest, there was something strange about the proclamation of what was coming – if you don’t know the story, read Luke chapter 1. From his birth, his upbringing was different – no alcohol, hair not cut, bring him up differently. Read the story, have a look at the art – go onto the National Gallery website and search for images of John the Baptist. Imagine this strange man, the disciples he had gathered around him – probably as strange as he was.



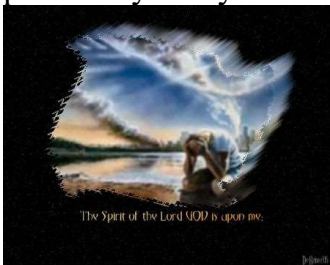
Jesus comes to him, and Jesus is far more normal. Jesus, as far as we know, was the carpenter’s son, the man who had taken over his father’s business, the oldest son of Mary’s family. Scripture tells us he was 30, so you imagine someone, part of the village, part of the business of life of the town, probably an important person in his synagogue. His baptism was not a quiet affair, a voice spoke from heaven – people will have noticed. “A report about him spread through the surrounding countryside” – people were talking. It’s not just a debate about one man and what he’s doing, though no doubt people were talking about Jesus and what all this meant – it is also a debate about God is doing. The people of Israel were in a difficult relationship with God. The Romans were in charge, everything was controlled, religion was controlled – people wanted freedom – and was John the Baptist, was Jesus, the man, the men, who would bring this about.



Jesus is teaching in the synagogues, he is being invited to stand, to speak to his fellow men (and hopefully, women too). People are talking. Was John a prophet, was Jesus a prophet, was God at work? These could be exciting times.

So you can imagine the excitement in the Nazareth synagogue that morning. This is their lad, their man, he's been part of this congregation for years – now, what is he going to say? Have they a prophet in their midst?

He was there, as is his custom – just a reminder there, that for Jesus worship was his custom. On the sabbath, in his synagogue. We would all do well to make it our custom – on Sunday, in church or on Zoom. (Not just, when there's nothing else to do, nowhere else to be – we should be doing better). Jesus was praised by everyone – we can imagine that.



Then he stands up, is handed the scroll of the prophet Isaiah, and unrolls it. He finds the place where it is written: “The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me to bring good news to the poor. Release to the captives, recovery of sight, letting the oppressed go free, proclaiming the year of the Lord’s favour.”

The year of the Lord’s favour sounds good – we’d all like that. Recovery of sight is good too – we’d all like that. But the rest of it?

Release to the captives – I’m sure we support that if we like the captives. I’m sure there must have been times in the history of this church in the 20th century where there must have been church men, village men, held in Prisoner of War Camps when people have sat here, deep in prayer, beseeching their release. I remember once taking to an old Suffolk boy who had been held in a Japanese PoW camp, and this passage meant a lot to him.



Three years ago when I preached on this passage I commented that “we want the captives released – when it’s someone like Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe” – still held captive three years later. But most of us are very frightened of those who are in prison, and we don’t want them released – even if they are there because of the failures of Society.

Of course we want the oppressed to go free – but all of us benefit from cheap goods, and cheap labour. Much of our comfort, our wealth, is sustained by an economic system which benefits us, and keeps others down. Are we, am I, willing to live more simply, live with less, in order to rebalance the world? The whole question of climate change is part of all this – we have the resources to cope with a changing world, it doesn’t affect us that much. If your environment is changing, if your land is becoming more arid, less productive – and this is happening because of the demands of the wealthy, the toll that others take on our world and its resources – you are being oppressed. Are we willing to work and lobby and lift that oppression?



St Peter's Cowgate, Newcastle upon Tyne

Let’s bring good news to the poor – so if the Lord said to me, “right Peter, time to leave comfortable Allestree/Darley Abbey, I am sending you to ...” would I listen, would I be willing to go? Most of us are pretty good at ignoring the poor – we are generous, but we channel our generosity through others, and tell ourselves that’s easier.

For some stupid reason, we haven’t read the rest of chapter 4. Read it, and meditate on it, when you get home. The people in the synagogue don’t like Jesus’ message, they are not comfortable with what he says. They are afraid of him, his message, and the radical changes he seems to be suggesting. He has words with them, they are extremely angry, and he’s lucky to escape with his life.



I've been a priest for 28 years, I hate to think the number of times I must have stood up in front of congregations and done my best to proclaim the word of God. Occasionally I've upset someone, a few people have sent stroppy letters (sometimes to me, occasionally to the bishop). There was one chap at Milbourne, politics slightly to the right of Attila the Hun, who walked out once – but then I did a good funeral for a friend of his, he decided I wasn't that bad, and when we went bumped into him at Milbourne last time we went to see the boys' graves he was absolutely charming (and told me how much better I was than my successor).



We are all tired, it's been a long couple of years – and none of us are as young as we used to be. I have no doubt we've achieved more because we have worked together, and I do think happy churches are usually very good things. I like churches where we laugh together more than we argue. But we must never be Christians who are so comfortable that we don't allow ourselves to be challenged, that we never move outside our safe zone, and that we don't use all these amazing gifts, all the resources that God has given us. Strive for the greater gifts, says St Paul – and never stop striving. We are the body of Christ, and we ask his strength and his blessing. Amen.

Peter Barham
21 January 2022