

Sermon - 23 Jan 22 - Great Ness

Familiarity breeds contempt - Luke 4:14-21; Isaiah 61

I wonder how many of you can remember a particular moment from your past that changed your life? Some possibilities that come back to my mind have to do with transport: skidding my motorbike sideways on a patch of oil on a corner outside South Kensington station; driving a 40ft container truck down a ship's ramp in a West African port and finding the brakes didn't work; speeding towards takeoff in a turbo-prop aircraft at Heathrow, only to have the brakes and reverse thrust slammed on as we approached the end of the runway. All of them were life changing, in the sense that I wouldn't be here if they had turned out differently.

But a more positive life changing moment came as I was checking the monitor screens in my church in London for a visiting speaker from California: as I worked my way round, I listened to him explaining scripture in a way I had never experienced before, connecting passages from the old and new testaments to make a story from different centuries come alive as a coherent whole. Our gospel reading this morning takes us back to a similar moment in Nazareth around AD 27 - perhaps the most pivotal moment in history. "Today" says Jesus, "this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing".

After his baptism in the Jordan, and being tempted in the wilderness by the devil, he begins his ministry as an itinerant teacher in the region of Galilee. By the time he reaches his home village of Nazareth his reputation has gone ahead of him, drawing praise from everyone, as it says in verse 15. Now, sitting in the synagogue he had attended from childhood, he announces that what Isaiah had prophesied 700 years ago was happening, and this congregation was the first to hear about it. For centuries the Jews had been looking for someone who would free them from their oppression by foreign powers - for God to send his anointed one to liberate them - and currently there were groups of rebels who were trying to bring it about through direct resistance to the Romans. But this was to be the real thing.

For his hearers, the verses from the start of Isaiah 61 would have linked to a much longer prophecy, that went on to speak of gladness replacing mourning, praise replacing despair, restoration of places devastated, prosperity, justice, everlasting joy and still more such blessings for Israel. If what Jesus said was true, it would be revolutionary. Indeed it was a revolution, but not in the way they wanted.

Sometimes what a great leader doesn't say is as important as what he says, and in this case Luke seems quite deliberate in dramatising the exact beginning and end of the quotation. Jesus stands up, receives the scroll, unrolls it, finds the place to start, and reads one and a half sentences; then he rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant and sits down. He stops at proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. He doesn't go on to mention the day of God's vengeance, which comes before the the list of other benefits in the prophecy.

So right at the beginning of his ministry - if they would listen to it - he is warning them that this is going to be something different from what they hoped for - this will be a time of God's grace, not of judgement. The poor were going to hear good news and the oppressed were going to be released from all manner of physical ailments - they were even going to see death undone - but the Romans were not going to be overthrown.

At first, the congregation liked what they heard. As in the other synagogues, they were amazed at his words of grace. But doubt came when they thought of him as just the local boy - Joseph's son (and not even Mary's son - much less the son of a father in heaven). So he tells them that, like every prophet before him, he won't be acceptable to them because they know him. Familiarity breeds contempt.

The problem was - they liked his miracles and his teaching but they couldn't accept that he had the power of the Spirit of God on him, as a prophet. Actually, he was revealing himself to be more than a prophet: the words "he has anointed me", quoted from Isaiah, are part of the Greek verb "chrío", from which we get the word Christ - the Greek word for the Hebrew "Messiah". So saying that Isaiah's scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing meant that he was claiming to come as God's Messiah to announce the arrival of God's reign on earth. And this was just the son of Joseph? No wonder the people of Nazareth couldn't handle it. So he left the place to go on his way, taking the prophesied blessings to other villages and inviting others, who were willing, to follow him in inaugurating the kingdom of God.

Calling Jesus' reading of Isaiah the pivotal moment is to recognise that the Christian faith is what historian Tom Holland has called "the most enduring and influential legacy of the ancient world - a revolution in values that has proven transformative like nothing else in history". In the course of two decades writing his 2019 book "Dominion", and earlier books about Greece and Rome, he explains, his perspective changed:

"I found the values of the ancient world increasingly alien, and nothing that I recognised as my own. It wasn't just the extremes of callousness that unsettled me but

the complete lack of any sense that the poor or the weak might have the slightest intrinsic value."

He realised that the values he had grown up with came from Christendom, not from the ancient civilisations which had so fascinated him, and it changed his view of life. We know that these values only came about because of the revolution Jesus introduced in that synagogue in Nazareth.

Travelling for research in the Middle East, Tom Holland had seen first hand, in a town at the frontier with IS, the aftermath of bloody battles which had left dead bodies lying amongst the rubble. And he had found it hard to believe when he saw, along one street, crucifixions reminiscent of scenes that would have been familiar in Judaea in Jesus' time. The western world had its peace under Rome - the Pax Romana - but it was a peace maintained by brutality, internal strife, and the privilege of the few at the expense of the many. Jesus came to bring peace by another means, for which we can be grateful today.

What is the lesson for us now? If we look at Isaiah's prophecy, it's not as obvious what is needed now as it was then. Proving Tom Holland's point, we don't have to go round springing innocent prisoners from jail, because our legal system doesn't put them there by corrupt processes; we have an NHS which can make it possible for people to see again, and can perform many other amazing acts of healing; we have a welfare system which protects people from poverty. They are flawed, but they are remarkably different from what existed in society in ancient times - as a consequence, says Tom Holland, of Jesus' intervention.

But, if we can tear our attention away from the squabbles of British politics, look at the world outside today: we see three superpowers vying for military supremacy and Russia on the brink, allegedly, of invading Ukraine. Violence and human rights abuses are rife. Populations are facing disaster from rising sea levels. The world is a risky place. Do we take our western Christian heritage too much for granted? Why should we think these benefits will last if our society increasingly denies the origin of them? But let us listen again to the words of Jesus and seek to follow him like those early disciples, bringing good news to those around us who are burdened with grief, or debt, or illness, and allowing his Spirit to work through us in extending his kingdom. We must not be like the people of Nazareth and ignore what he is calling us to do because we are too familiar with it.