

Sermon - Scripture fulfilled, here, now

Based on: Nehemiah 8.1–10 (omitting 4, 7); Luke 4.14–21

Ezra reads aloud to the people

- Before I speak to the Gospel reading, I'm going to provide a short explanation about the Old Testament reading from the book Nehemiah.
- The two books, Ezra and Nehemiah were originally one book, and certainly remained so in the Hebrew Bible until the 15th century.
- Scholars have identified a number of puzzles around how the one book came to be split into two, and how some passages in them appear to be out of chronological order.
- Nevertheless, the books effectively describe how many of the Jews returned to Jerusalem and Palestine after exile in Babylon, and reconstructed the city and the temple, amidst opposition from those concerned that the Jews would rebel against the Babylonian empire again.
- The reconstruction was not merely a physical one, but also a spiritual one.
- Before all the leaders and property owners had been taken into exile, the temple was the political and religious centre.
- When Nebuchadnezzar decided to put an end to their ongoing rebellion, he destroyed the city walls, the temple and palaces and their contents.
- So while the Jews were able to take copies of their scriptures with them into exile, they were deprived of the whole focus of worshipping God in the context of the temple.
- When a number of them returned after forty years, it seems that they needed leadership to help unite them and focus their efforts on both the physical and the spiritual reconstruction - leadership provided by Ezra the priest and Nehemiah the governor, amongst others.
- Today's reading describes how the law of Moses was read aloud to the gathered people, and their responses.
- The law would have been read in the language it was written in, Hebrew.
- However, it needed to be interpreted, since those who were living in Palestine at that time spoke Aramaic.
- As they came to understand what was written, they wept, because they recognised that they had failed to keep the faith in the form it had been written down in, according to Moses.
- However, Ezra the priest urged them to regard the occasion as one of holy celebration, since they were then actively engaged in reconnecting with God in the manner of their ancestors.

Jesus gives his manifesto

- In a way, this reading from Nehemiah provides an interesting context for the Gospel reading.
- At this point I must state that the commentary on Luke's Gospel that I find very helpful is the one entitled *The Hospitality of God*, by the Jesuit Dr Brendan Byrne, who has taught at the Jesuit Theological College in Melbourne, and in some instances I quote directly from that commentary.
- The Gospel starts with Jesus, having been filled with the Spirit at his baptism and then having undergone a time of preparation in the wilderness, returning to Galilee.
- And in Luke's Gospel account he starts by going to synagogues in the region, and engaging with the scriptures at each synagogue.
- We are not told what he speaks about, until we have the description of him coming to the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth.
- By this time word of mouth already provides that congregation with some expectation that his teaching is worth listening to.
- Next Sunday we will hear how the congregation at Nazareth respond to Jesus, but for today we will limit ourselves to his initial teaching.

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- And he starts, not with the law of Moses, but with a prophecy of Isaiah.
- In Luke's gospel account, this quote from Isaiah is effectively the manifesto of Jesus' ministry.
- Luke appears to have decided that this quote, by Jesus, must be given maximum emphasis.
- Luke does this in a few different ways.

1. Re-ordering Mark

- Firstly, Luke changes the order in which this appears from Mark's account.
- Luke mainly follows Mark's ordering of events, and so on the few occasions that he changes that order, it means that Luke is giving those events a different significance.
- Mark describes Jesus preaching at Nazareth only after many other instances of teaching and healing, whereas Luke puts this moment at the very outset of his ministry, before he had even called his first disciples.

2. Chiastic rhetoric

- The second way that Luke gives greater emphasis to Jesus' action is by using a rhetorical device called a chiastic structure, which occurs many times in the Hebrew scriptures.
- It is a simple sequence of actions that are then reversed.
- So in this passage Jesus stands, receives the scroll, and unrolls it.
- After reading it the sequence is reversed, in that he rolls up the scroll, hands it back, and then sits down.
- Luke did not have to describe all those actions, and could merely have stated what Jesus read from the scroll - but the fact that he frames it with this chiastic pattern is a way of dramatically emphasising the significance of it.

3. One sentence sermon

- The third aspect which emphasises this quote is that Jesus' teaching, as described by Luke, consists of one sentence: *'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'* (Luke 4.21)
- That's it.
- Anything further that Jesus says - as we will hear next Sunday - is simply responding to the reaction of the congregation.
- But his actual teaching, as Luke describes it, is literally this: *'Today - this scripture - has been fulfilled - in your hearing.'*
- Such a short sentence would have made everyone stop and think, and then register the absolutely profound statement Jesus was making.
- They would have been familiar with the original quote from Isaiah 61.1-2:
*The spirit of the Lord God is upon me,
because the Lord has anointed me;
he has sent me to bring good news to the oppressed,
to bind up the broken-hearted,
to proclaim liberty to the captives,
and release to the prisoners;
to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour*
- This comes from the third part of the book of Isaiah in which the prophet announces his ministry and message to the exiles returning from Babylon¹, that is, to the people that Ezra and Nehemiah were leading.

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- And Jesus is simply reminding people, in effect: Remember this program composed by the prophet Isaiah centuries ago?
- Remember what our Lord God promised his people when they were seeking to reconnect with their faith?
- Jesus, in effect, says: Well, I am the one whom the Lord has anointed, and on whom the Lord God has placed his Spirit.
- And I have been sent
 - to bring good news to those in need of it,
 - to proclaim release to those who are held captive to sin,
 - to enable those who are blind to God's blessing to be able to see that blessing,
 - to enable those who are oppressed by injustice to be freed from that oppression, and
 - to proclaim the grace of God's undeserved favour being available to all, now.
- This is happening here, and now.

How is St John's participating with Jesus?

- Luke puts this at the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, because it appears to summarise what the whole of Jesus' ministry is all about.
- Everything that Jesus says and does from that moment onwards, for the three years following, is about fulfilling that scripture.
- Now I want to suggest that if Luke's Gospel account was the only gospel that was written down for us to access, that this passage would carry even more obvious weight for all church communities than might currently seem to be the case.
- I think it particularly relevant to consider this in our context, for our church community of St John the Divine Anglican Church in Croydon.
- And to ask ourselves: how are we participating in the ministry of Jesus today?
- How are we enabling the good news that Isaiah describes, and that Jesus focuses on?
- Over the years we have supported and contributed to various charities that undertake work elsewhere - donating clothing and food and money.

On-site services

- The particular aspect I want to draw our own attention to today, are the good works that take place here, on our church premises, that we might not be fully aware of.
- I'm referring to the community meals programs, and the many community support services.
- During the course of each week, nine different groups meet here: AA, Al Anon, and NA.
- Instead of our buildings being empty between church services, there are people coming here to find support, encouragement, and friendship as they struggle with some of the challenges of life.
- And St John's actively partners with these groups.
- We provide the facilities: the meeting space with the chairs, the toilets, the kitchen, and make sure that these are kept in good order.
- Yes - we do charge some hire usage, but at a significantly discounted rate - usually discounted at 70% to 90% compared to the going commercial rate.
- And at 100% discount for the community meals programs that take place on Tuesday and Wednesday evenings.
- We have a team of our own parishioners who provide the meal once a month for the Tuesday evening program - but there are also other church communities who run the Wednesday evening meals program, and who participate on other Tuesday evenings.
- And our participation with them extends to the fact that we provide our facilities at 100% discount.

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- We ourselves are covering the costs of the facilities, and the wear and tear that goes with participating in this ministry.
- I am spelling this out to open our own eyes to see how we at St John's are participating in Isaiah's prophecy, in ways that we might not otherwise be conscious of.
- So that when we make our own financial offerings as part of our church services, that we comprehend better how God is using our gifts to further his kingdom, right here, right now.
- When people ask you 'What good does the Church do?' you can tell them about our on-site partnership with AA, with Al Anon, with NA, with the TDRM community meals, and with the Winter Shelter community meals.
- And when we hear the teaching of Jesus, we can celebrate and give thanks that we are participating in this as well:

'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Today's collect

Life-giving God,
who sent your Son Jesus to proclaim your kingdom
and to teach with authority:
anoint us with your Spirit,
that we too may bring good news to the poor,
bind up the broken-hearted,
and proclaim liberty to the captive;
through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.

¹ *The Hospitality of God, p47*