Grace Lutheran Community, 23rd January, 2022, 3rd Sunday after Epiphany, Year C

*** ***

14 Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about Him spread through all the surrounding country. **15** He began to teach in their synagogues and was praised by everyone. **16** When He came to Nazareth, where He had been brought up, He went to the synagogue on the Sabbath day, as was His custom. He stood up to read, **17** and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was given to Him. He unrolled the scroll and found the place where it was written: **18** '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, **19** to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour.' **20** And He rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant, and sat down. The eyes of all in the synagogue were fixed on Him. **21** Then He began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' *Luke 4:16-21*

*** ***

What do you expect of 'governments'? What are your 'expectations' of those elected to 'public office'? This is a very broad question, but how often do we start a sentence along the line of "The government should…" and then we describe some way we expect 'the government' should act? For example, at the moment, there are those who say "The government should be supplying free rapid-antigen-tests to every household, as has happened in other places around the world." But other say they "Do not want 'the government' interfering in our every-day lives" and that "People should be responsible for their own lives". There are also others who believe 'the government' "should be made up if people who live what they preach", and so call for what they see as certain 'moral standards'.

Have you ever started a sentence, "The government should…"? Have you also ever complained about what you see as 'the government' wanting to 'know too much' or 'interfering in your life'? What do you expect of 'governments'? What are your 'expectations' of those elected to 'public office'?

We may not really enjoy arguments about elected officials and political policies, even if now and then we become involved in such debates. Setting our various opinions aside, the Lord commands us to "be subject to the governing authorities" (Romans 13:1b). All authority comes from God and earthly authorities have been set in place by Him. We are to pay "respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed" (Romans 13:7b). We may not want to respect leaders with whom we disagree, but we remember that the apostle Paul wrote those Spirit-breathed words under the rule of Rome, the empire whose ruler eventually sentenced the apostle to death.

Yet there is some interesting advice in Psalm 146:3, "Put not your trust in princes, in a son of man, in whom there is no salvation." We are not to place

ultimate trust in earthly rulers, but not because of any particular political views they might hold, or because of their leadership skills or lack thereof. We are not to trust earthborn princes because, as the psalm reminds us, "they are but mortal." Many rulers serve well; they enforce laws and protect their citizens. We are to be subject to the governing authorities, giving "respect to whom respect is owed, honour to whom honour is owed" (Romans 13:7b). But we are not to place ultimate faith in them because those authorities "are but mortal."

As we come to our Gospel for this day (Luke 4:14-21) we are reminded that we are speaking about 'power'. When you hear the word "power," what comes to mind? Significant influence or wealth, as in one who strides down the "corridors of power"? Or perhaps great physical strength, such as front row players in a Rugby side? As we come to the Gospel, we are introduced to this passage that says: "Then Jesus, filled by the power of the Holy Spirit…" According to Luke, Jesus does what He does and says what He says precisely because He is filled with power, great power, the power of the Holy Spirit.

Jesus is filled with the powerful Spirit of God and the goodwill of the Trinity's love. When the world was made through Christ (Colossians 1.15-20), it was the Spirit who hovered in the words spoken by the Father as the world came to be. When Christ was raised from the dead, it was the power of the Spirit who resurrected Him—that same power that shared with and is alive in us! (Romans 8.11-13) So this isn't just a case of "thoughts and prayers" or well wishes that comes off Jesus' lips and fills the synagogue with its hollow words; they are filled with God's promising presence and work begun.

Jesus reads the prophetic words from the holy Scriptures, then sits down in order to teach about them, as was the custom in the synagogue. It seems to me that these words of hope and promise caught the heart and imagination of everyone gathered there. All eyes are fixed on Jesus. Then He began to say to them, 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

We are in another 'election year' here in Australia. Soon many people will be promising what they will do if they are re-elected or elected to Federal Parliament. But Jesus told us what He would do: "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."

There are many fascinating things here. We could look at the year gap between Luke 4:13 and Luke 4:14 (taken up in the opening chapters of John's Gospel account, with a focus on people 'believing in Jesus'). We could reflect on the fact that Jesus was in the Synagogue "as was His custom" (that is, God's call to Christians to regularly attend worship together with other believers). We could focus on the rituals and traditions in worship that sustain people in life and faith (as it sustained Jesus in His temptation in the wilderness when He was able to properly quote God's Word back to Satan). We could focus that Jesus is here

based in Galilee, which is well to the north of Jerusalem (and often seen on the fringe). We could note how many people already here rejected the message of Jesus (see next week's Gospel: Luke 4:22-30). But instead, with a compilation of words from the prophet Isaiah (primarily Isaiah 61:1-2, but also 58:6), Jesus announces His mission.

As Jesus announces His mission, He begins by saying, "The Spirit of the Lord is upon Me". The Spirit leads Jesus in His mission. Jesus says, "He has anointed me" (v. 18). Jesus was anointed at His baptism, where the Spirit descended upon Him like a dove and the voice from heaven said, "You are My beloved Son. In You I am well pleased" (3:22).

Jesus then says that He is called "to preach good news to the poor" (v. 18). One question here is: Is Jesus talking about spiritual poverty or economic poverty? He is almost certainly talking about outsiders, people of low status, vulnerable people—whether their problems stem from economic poverty or other causes. Jesus has a mission to the poor, the captives, the blind, and the oppressed, categories that indicate the breadth of his concern for people in need.

Jesus then says He has come "to proclaim release to the captives" (v. 18). Luke illustrates what this means by the first of Jesus' miracles in this Gospel—the cleansing of a man possessed by a demon (vv. 31-37). While we tend not to believe in demons today, we are confronted daily with stories of demonic behaviour. Captives would also include people imprisoned for debt, another outgrowth of poverty.

Jesus also says He has come to bring "recovering of sight to the blind" (v. 18d). In this Gospel, Jesus will restore the sight of blind people (7:21-22; 18:35-43), and will also tell prideful people to "ask the poor, the maimed, the lame, or the blind" to come their banquet table (14:13). Jesus' interest is not limited to physical sight, but encompasses spiritual vision as well (for example: Luke 6:41-42; 7:44; 8:16; 9:27; 10:23; 11:33; 12:54-56; 17:22; 21:27-31). Later, Jesus will give Saul/Paul his mission "to open their eyes, that they may turn from darkness to light and from the power of Satan to God, that they may receive forgiveness of sins and an inheritance among those who are sanctified by faith in me" (Acts 26:18). The emphasis in that verse clearly has to do with spiritual vision.

And Jesus came "to proclaim the acceptable year of the Lord" (v. 19). Isaiah wrote these words originally as encouragement for Jewish people in exile. The salvation of which Isaiah spoke is now to be found in Jesus.

This message is often described as his inaugural address. Jesus is describing the character of His ministry. He is establishing His priorities and the direction of His work. He is casting His vision for the reordering of relationships – good news to the poor, release to the captive, sight to the blind, letting the oppressed go free, declaring God's favour.

And at the heart of Jesus' work is an unspoken and yet ever present question: Where does it hurt? That's the question that drives and directs Jesus' life and ministry. As Jesus will later say, "Those who are well have no need of a physician, but those who are sick" (Luke 5:31). Where does it hurt? Look at the world, read the news, reflect on your life and it's not hard to see how much we need Jesus.

What did Jesus come to do for us? He came to set us free from the worst tyranny possible -- slavery to sin and the fear of death, and the eternal destruction of both body and soul. God's power alone can save us from emptiness and poverty of spirit, from confusion and error, and from hopelessness and the fear of annihilation. The gospel of salvation is "good news" for us today. Do you know the joy and freedom of the gospel?

"Today" is the first word of Jesus' public teaching. It's not about what happened yesterday or what might happen tomorrow. It is about today. "Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing," Today Jesus brings good news to you. Today He proclaims the year of the Lord's favour. Here's the irony. We too often miss today fretting over yesterday and worrying about tomorrow and yet the presence of Christ today somehow heals our past and prepares us for the future. Good news, release, sight, freedom, the Lord's favour. All these are made real and present today.

"Today this Scripture is fulfilled in your hearing." Yes, today, dear friends. Right here, right now, in your hearing. Jesus is still speaking these same words today. He is proclaiming the good news into your ears. What a sermon it is that Jesus preached. He said, "Today this Scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing." While Jesus' sermon is a model for our churches, it was also unique. No one else fulfills the Scripture but Jesus.

Jesus Christ is active in the here and now. He's not off in some remote corner of the universe, not viewing the world through a telescope from heaven. He has not left His people here to struggle and flounder until He comes back again. Christ is alive and has been at work in human society for twenty centuries, just as He said He would be: "I am with you always, to the end of the age" (Matthew. 28:20).

We are blessed with the freedom to worship God and the freedom to engage in political debates. But we remember too, that while we are citizens of an earthly nation, "our citizenship is in heaven" (Philippians 3:20). We care for our earthly home, yet acknowledge that we are "strangers and exiles on the earth." We "desire a better country, that is, a heavenly one" (Hebrews 11:13, 16). That better country is ours through Jesus.

"Lord Jesus, You are the fulfillment of all our hopes and dreams. Through the gift of Your Holy Spirit You bring us grace, truth, life, and freedom. Fill me with the joy of the gospel and inflame my heart with love and zeal for You and Your will. Amen."