

Sunday 26 January 2025
The Third Sunday of Epiphany

Liverpool Parish Church

OT: Nehemiah 8.1-3,5-6,8-10
NT: 1 Corinthians 12.12-31a
Gp: Luke 4.14-21

There are two words that stand out for me in our gospel reading this morning. The first word is 'today.' 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.' Imagine you came to the synagogue that day, perhaps because you knew he would be there. Already, he has a reputation as a teacher, a healer, a prophet. Everyone speaks well of him. For now.

He reads from Isaiah, and he chooses to put together verses from different chapters. It's all very deliberate. And you wonder, what he is up to. You wonder if he will perform a sign, or give teachings on the law, or prophesy about what is to come. And he sits down, in the customary position of a teacher. And he says: 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Imagine the impact of Jesus' words on you. On those around you. Would it be excitement, hope? Or puzzlement maybe even outrage? After all, who does he think he is to say that scripture is fulfilled - in *him*?

He is not talking about God's actions in the past. He is not pointing forward to what will happen in the future. No: it is now, today, that the scripture is fulfilled. And how is it fulfilled? Good news for the poor. Captives released. Vision restored. Freedom for the oppressed. This is not a vague promise about a world to come; it's a proclamation of a world transformed. It is earthy, real. It speaks to broken bodies, crushed spirits. It rattles the cages built by injustice and poverty.

Looking at our world today, there are many who make big speeches from positions of power. The eyes of millions are on them. A click of a mouse, a stroke of a pen, a transaction completed and countless lives are affected. Wars are declared, territories occupied. Dissension is crushed. The marginal and vulnerable are scapegoated or even defined out of existence. The earth is exploited and nature reduced to raw material. Money buys everything, except compassion or equality.

Jesus lived in such a time: a time of empire. When he comes to proclaim the kingdom of God, he is not offering an escape into a heavenly world. The kingdom of God is another kind of empire: one that liberates rather than enslaves. One that is not ruled by fear, but by the Spirit of joy, love and delight in creation.

We should not fool ourselves that the Christian gospel is compatible with earthly empires, whatever their supposed political stripe. Just before our gospel passage, Luke tells the story of Jesus' temptation. In it, the devil tempts Jesus to claim power over God and to rule a worldly empire. Jesus refuses. At every step, along the whole way that leads to the cross, he refuses. He goes to the edges, the untouchables, the excluded, the unloved wilds and says, here the kingdom is born and grows. As for our empires? They must fall. No stone will be left upon another.

Well, that sounds like a nice dream for a future time. But: *today*? That is hard to believe. It is hard to believe when we see modern day empires and crooks and bigots ruining people's lives and burning the earth. It's hard enough when we have to face the more personal challenges and traumas of life. I know how hard I have found it over these past weeks to keep going with a heavy sack of grief on my back after my mother died. We all face this kind of things at times in our life.

So how can Jesus say *today*? Because this is not just a message, not just words. It is the Word made flesh. He embodies another way. As Jesus heals and teaches, lives are transformed. Forgiveness runs out to meet the lost and forsaken. And it runs to meet us too, reaches out to our lost and forsaken hearts.

In small ways, like a seed, the kingdom of God starts and grows. In secret, in forgotten places, in the wastes and weeds, it takes root. And this is not all, for Jesus gathers a community to be his body continuing in the world. This is what Paul says in his letter to the Corinthians. He has already had a go at the Corinthians for allowing inequality to ruin their communion. How can you celebrate the eucharist, he demands, if you privilege the rich and powerful and push the hungry aside? No, if our communion is real, all must be fed. Otherwise we are not discerning the body of Christ.

Paul goes on, in the passage we heard today, to talk about the mutual belonging of each member of that body. Everyone matters; we suffer together and rejoice together. The rich diversity of our gifts builds up our common life. Those who say 'only I – or those like me belong to the body' only dismember it. All belong.

The church is not just an organisation and certainly not a holy huddle for insiders. It is called to be Christ's body in the world: a body that shows, makes flesh, the life God wants us to live. The church should be the counterculture to privilege and injustice. Are we going to succeed perfectly in answering this call? Of course not. But we are not called in our perfection. It is in our imperfection that God loves and calls us. God knows we can find it hard to live up to that calling. But with grace, and with the strength of God's delight in us, at times we can.

When we see Jesus on the cross, we know that God's way is through our vulnerable humanity. Not through words shouted through the megaphones of the powerful, but through the Word made flesh; not through the dogmas of success, but through the strength of letting go the idols of success.

Today, then: *today* the gospel of the end of empires must be lived. Today we work to release people from oppression and poverty and prejudice. It may seem such a small and flickering light in the overarching darkness of the world, but so it was with Jesus. And yet he changed everything.

If 'today' is the first word that struck me from the gospel, what is the other? It is a word that actually does not appear. It is a line from Isaiah that Jesus *misses out*, where Isaiah proclaims 'a day of vengeance of our God'. *Vengeance*: that is the second word. A word missing from Jesus's proclamation. Because vengeance only keeps the cycle of punishment and pain going. There is no good news in vengeance and no vengeance in the good news. You may remember the line from scripture: vengeance is mine, says the Lord, I will repay. Well: Jesus makes vengeance his by doing away with it; and when he repays, he repays

hatred with love. That is a difficult message too. How dearly we'd like to see those big speech makers get their comeuppance. But if we live by resentment, it will only poison us and choke the growth of the kingdom.

Let it go. Let resentment and vengeance and anger and fear wither, so a new thing can grow. Freed from all of that, we can be the body of Christ, we can give flesh and blood to that other communion, that other peace that Jesus brings. And we do not have to do it perfectly. Nor do we have to do it alone, or from scratch. It has already begun. Grace is already given. And 'Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing.'

Fr Steven Shakespeare