

Jesus in the synagogue **by Rev John Castle**

A sermon given on Sunday 27th January 2019 at St Michael's Church, Sandhurst

Readings: Nehemiah 8:1-10, Luke 4:14-21

Announcements

Would you take a moment to think about an announcement you have heard that really moved you? It could be an announcement about something in the news, nationally or internationally, or announcement in your family, whether happy or sad, or a piece of information about a friend, or about the result of a job interview, or a young person getting that place at uni...

What are you thinking of? The news that you were going to be a parent or grandparent? The result of a general election or a referendum? Perhaps the news of the death of someone close to you, or of a famous person you admired? A piece of news about an earthquake or other natural disaster in a distant part of the world?

In today's readings we heard of two occasions when the scriptures were read to a group of people, eliciting an emotional response. In the reading from the book of Nehemiah, the Jews who had returned from exile in Babylon heard the reading of the book of the law by the priest Ezra, and they wept as they realised how many of the commandments of the Lord they had failed to keep. In the Gospel reading from Luke chapter 4, Jesus stands up in the synagogue in his home town of Nazareth to read from the prophet Isaiah and the congregation are spellbound at the way he reads it. As he begins to speak about what he has read, their reaction is initially favourable, but then turns to anger as he begins to challenge them (this is the bit after the passage we read).

How do you respond when you hear the scriptures read in church? Do you think, "oh, it's that bit again", or do you feel uplifted, inspired, challenged? Or when you hear on the news about a disaster, natural or man-made, do you think, "oh, those poor people!" and hurry to your computer to make an online donation, or does it just wash over like so much other bad news? The danger in our modern world is that we are so bombarded with information of many kinds that we develop the habit of tuning out and just concentrating on our own immediate concerns. After all, what can we do about the earthquake in Indonesia, or the war in Yemen? And all that stuff from the Bible, well, it's OK in small doses, but if we started trying to put it into practice in our lives, where would it end? We don't really fancy the idea of selling our possessions and giving it to the poor, and we're far too busy to volunteer for all that stuff in church.

Jesus in the synagogue in Nazareth

When Jesus stood up to read the scriptures in his home synagogue in Nazareth, I wonder what people were expecting? Of course, they knew him well as the carpenter whose shop was in the street behind the High Street. He'd been a regular worshipper with his mother, brother and sisters before he went off south to see the Baptist. But he'd not been home for several months, and they'd heard that he was preaching in other synagogues in Galilee and apparently healing the sick as well.

And then Jesus stand up and reads from Isaiah. This was something else. Not like someone just reading out the words off the page. Jesus speaks the ancient words of Isaiah as if he

himself had written them – indeed as if they were his own words which he was speaking about himself:

‘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.’ (Luke 4:18-19 NRSV)

Jesus rolls up the scroll, gives it back to the attendant and sits down. You could have heard a pin drop. Everyone is looking at him. What is he going to say next?

‘Today this scripture has been fulfilled in your hearing¹.’

For Jesus, these words written centuries before to encourage his ancestors on their return from exile in Babylon came alive. Then, God had been offering his ancient people new hope and a new start, with the freedom to rediscover what it meant to be his beloved children, to rebuild a broken society in a climate of equality and justice. But now something even more momentous was happening, and Jesus, fresh from his baptism at the river Jordan, knew that he was the one God had anointed with his Spirit to bring the message of reconciliation, hope and freedom from oppression to his people.

Our calling today

I wonder whether you can answer this question: in the light of what you know about today’s world, do you think it is still true that:

- the poor need to hear good news?
- there are captives who need to be released?
- there are those with physical or spiritual blindness who need to recover sight?
- there are oppressed people who need to be set free?

I have been reading the latest Tearfund magazine. I’ve read about Tearfund’s response to the Indonesian earthquake and tsunami last September, which killed more than 2,000 people. They have worked through a network of Indonesian churches and partners, providing temporary shelter and emergency kitchens and deploying medical teams including an orthopaedic surgeon and a midwife. I’ve also read about Tearfund’s support for a project in Jordan which is providing help to Syrian refugees, including providing support for women who are experiencing domestic and sexual abuse.

In the light of ongoing disasters, wars, human trafficking and exploitation, whose job is it to bring good news, release, healing and freedom from oppression? Shall we leave it to the politicians? Amnesty International? Doctors, psychologists, charities, the police?

Isn’t it the job of the Church to fulfil the mission of Jesus today? And if so, does that mean the Archbishops, the clergy, the paid youth and family workers? Or is this the mission of every Christian – your mission, in fact?

The Israelites listening to Ezra reading from the book of the Law started weeping when they realised how inadequately they were putting their faith into practice, and perhaps we may

¹ Luke 4:21

feel the same. The task seems too big, the responsibility too great. But Nehemiah said to them:

this day is holy to our LORD; [and] do not be grieved, for the joy of the LORD is your strength.' (Nehemiah 8:10 NRSV)

One of the great things about Tearfund is that it mobilises the church in places like Sandhurst to support Christians in other countries who are making a difference on the ground. We can be part of their work through our praying, our financial giving and fundraising and by raising awareness of the needs of others. I'd like to read some words from the Tearfund magazine written by a lady called Val, who's been a Tearfund supporter for 33 years, which illustrate some of the ways ordinary Christians can make a difference.

Val's Story

I first became aware of Tearfund when I was at a church in London. This church was supporting a young couple who were working for Tearfund in the slums of Cairo, Egypt. I heard what they were doing and I thought, "Oh, this sounds like really good, practical work". It was rooted in the gospel of Jesus and there seemed to be such love.

When I moved to Ipswich, I was asked to become a volunteer for Tearfund. Through this, I started to learn more about the different places where Tearfund works. I thought how sustainable a lot of it was. I liked the way that they worked with local partners, training local people to help their communities. I liked the "helping people to help themselves" aspect of it. That encouraged me to keep giving, keep supporting and get more involved through leading the prayer group.

I'm a Christian and I believe in a God who is powerful and loving and compassionate. People overseas are loved and precious to God just as I am. So it seems natural to pray for them just as I would pray for my family, my neighbour, for people at church, for my friends.

Tearfund has been a hugely important part of my life for a long time. By giving a financial gift to Tearfund in my will, I'm giving a gift that will last forever. That gift will help someone to change their life. The change in their life will affect other people around them, their family, their community, their children. So that gift will go on beyond my time on this earth.

What about us?

Val's testimony mentions several ways that we can be involved in the work of Tearfund. Maybe you are already a regular supporter, or you support another charity that does similar work. But if not, or if you'd like to be more involved, here are some ways of taking the next step:

- Sign up to receive Tearfund news by post and/or e-mail
- Set up a regular donation
- Make a one-off donation or leave a legacy
- Become a Tearfund "champion" for this parish
- Start a prayer group for Tearfund's work

To find out more, go to https://www.tearfund.org/en/about_you/

I'm going to finish by playing a creative piece of poetry written for Tearfund in the genre known as "spoken word". But just before I do, I'd like to return to the questions I posed at the beginning of this sermon about how we react to hearing the scriptures read, and to hearing about the needs of the world. I think the answer to the question hangs on what kind of faith we have – is it just some kind of intellectual belief, or is it a way of thinking about our lives and our world that motivates and inspires us to live differently?

I hope the following poem gives you food for thought and inspiration for action:

https://www.tearfund.org/en/2019/01/why_faith/?utm_source=One+Voice&utm_campaign=3631d67eef-One+Voice+Weekly+25+01+2019&utm_medium=email&utm_term=0_ff3e17b03a-3631d67eef-31472809

Prayer

Here's a prayer from Tearfund that you can use:

Loving God,
Thank you for the community of faith to which we belong.
Give each of us the wisdom to see how we can put our faith into action,
and then give us the courage to act.
We pray for a fresh wave of compassionate action in the church,
so that the 'night will become like the noonday.'
In Jesus' name. Amen.