

Good News to the Poor

Sunday 08 August 2021

Call to Worship

Psalm 34

I bless GOD every chance I get;
my lungs expand with his praise.

I live and breathe GOD;

if things aren't going well, hear this and be happy:

Join me in spreading the news;
together let's get the word out.

**God met me more than halfway,
he freed me from my anxious fears.**

Look at him; give him your warmest smile.
Never hide your feelings from him.

**Open your mouth and taste, open your eyes and see how good God is.
Blessed are you who run to him.**

Be thou my vision

Be Thou my Vision, O Lord of my heart
Naught be all else to me, save that Thou art
Thou my best Thought, by day or by night
Waking or sleeping, Thy presence my light

Be Thou my Wisdom, and Thou my true Word
I ever with Thee and Thou with me, Lord
Thou my great Father, I Thy true son
Thou in me dwelling, and I with Thee one

Riches I heed not, nor vain empty praise;
thou mine inheritance, now and always.
Thou and thou only, first in my heart,
Ruler of heaven, my treasure thou art.

High King of Heaven, my victory won
May I reach Heaven's joys, O bright Heav'n's Sun
Heart of my own heart, whate'er befall
Still be my Vision, O Ruler of all

Reading 2 Kings 4:38-41

Death in the Pot

³⁸Elisha returned to Gilgal and there was a famine in that region. While the company of the prophets was meeting with him, he said to his servant, "Put on the large pot and cook some stew for this company."

³⁹One of them went out into the fields to gather herbs and found a wild vine. He gathered some of its gourds and filled the fold of his cloak. When he returned, he cut them up into the pot of stew, though no one knew what they were. ⁴⁰The stew was poured out for the men, but as they began to eat it, they cried out, "Man of God, there is death in the pot!" And they could not eat it.

⁴¹Elisha said, "Get some flour." He put it into the pot and said, "Serve it to the people to eat." And there was nothing harmful in the pot.

Prayer of Adoration and Confession

Turn to your neighbour and name something for which you are grateful. If you would like, share with the congregation. As you do, finish with the words, 'and so let us say...'

We respond with the words, 'For this we are grateful.'

God of gift and giving, we have so much for which we can be grateful.

Forgive us for when we focus on those things that are not what we would like and neglect all the good we experience. Help us to be a grateful people. In that gratefulness, help us to be givers of joy and sharers of thankfulness.

Hear our private confessions now, we pray.

We are seen by God.

We are heard by God.

We are loved by God.

We are forgiven by God.

Thanks be to God.

Amen.

Reflection

Sticks

Examine your stick. Run your fingers over the surface. Look for any flaws or imperfections. Find the interesting and the intriguing.

Think about how your stick might represent you. What is it that connects you to the stick?

What do you think God might say to the stick if it were a person? Why?

Would God say something like that to you? Why or why not?

Notices

The Peace

Share one thing you noticed about your stick

Lord, I lift your name

Lord I lift your name on high

Lord I love to sing your praises

I'm so glad you're in my life

I'm so glad you came to save us

You came from heaven to earth to show the way

From the earth to the cross my debt to pay

From the cross to the grave

From the grave to the sky

Lord I lift your name on high

When the music fades

Matt Redman

When the music fades, all is stripped away,

And I simply come

Longing just to bring, something that's of worth

That will bless Your heart

I'll bring You more than a song

For a song in itself is not what You have required

You search much deeper within, through the way things appear

You're looking into my heart

I'm coming back to the heart of worship,

And it's all about You, all about You Jesus

I'm sorry Lord for the thing I've made it

When it's all about You, all about You Jesus

King of endless worth

No one could express how much You deserve

Though I'm weak and poor

All I have is Yours, every single breath

Reading Luke 4:16-21

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.”

Message Good News to the Poor

Jesus, as we come to this scripture and ponder its meaning for our lives today we ask that you would open our hearts to your Holy Spirit and reveal your ways and thoughts to us. Let us be ready vessels for your overflowing so we can serve you wholeheartedly in all we do and say.

Over the coming month we are going to be thinking about this story of Jesus in the Nazareth Synagogue and how it might speak into who and how we are today. What can that look like toward the end of 2021 in Oamaru and beyond?

A short introduction. Our setting is in Nazareth, where Jesus spent many of his formative years. It is where he would have made friends, where he learnt the skills of a carpenter. He was recognised by the people there and he recognised them. Then, on the sabbath day, he went to the synagogue, as was his custom. He was a regular member of the synagogue congregation. Just like you are a regular member of this (online) congregation. He wasn't a visitor, he was one of them. As one of them it was perfectly normal for him to stand to read, and following the reading to speak on it. It is worth noting that he was literate, not necessarily a given in those times, but seemingly reasonably common among the Jews.

We don't know whether he asked for the scroll of Isaiah, or whether it was handed to him randomly. Whatever the case, he unrolled it to what we now call chapter 61 and read the first 2 verses.

It is the very first part of that reading I want to focus on today.

“The Spirit of the Lord is upon me,
because he has anointed me

Let’s have a brief look at what this short phrase can tell us about what Jesus is doing.

The Spirit of the Lord

This is a phrase that is used of Samson, David, Samuel, Philip, Paul among others. In some cases we are told that the Spirit of the Lord overwhelmed and controlled in a situation. Philip was snatched away by the Spirit of the Lord and deposited in a distant city. The Spirit of the Lord was mightily upon David. We are told the Spirit of the Lord departed from Saul. In every instance the use of the phrase suggests something profound, and generally powerful, is in process. You could argue that is kind of obvious, yet I think it is worth noting that these words are not used lightly. The Spirit of the Lord probably refers to the Holy Spirit, although it needn’t to have the same impact. This is God acting directly upon a person.

Is upon me

The Spirit of the Lord is upon Jesus. God is not acting randomly, simply spinning out on whoever turns up. Rather, God is placing his Spirit on a particular person. We see in the book of Acts that the Spirit came on everyone gathered in the house, not on the entire crowd gathered around about. The specificity is important. God could have chosen to simply go to town on everyone in the region. It bears asking why God didn’t and doesn’t simply take over and make all the moves. Of course that is where it gets really interesting. But first...

Because

There is a reason for the Spirit of the Lord being upon someone. Just as it is not a random event, neither is the purpose of the event random. When we see that someone has the Spirit of the Lord on them we need to be asking, ‘Why?’ What is it that God has in store for this person or these people? Whatever it is, it will be for God’s glory, not the glory of the person in question. In the story of Samson, we see that God stirs up Samson to go on a rampage in order to deal with the Philistines (Judges 14:4). There is purpose in the Spirit being upon him. We see the purpose in the Spirit being upon David (1 Samuel 16:13) as he brought glory to God. We see the purpose in the Spirit lifting from Saul as he consulted mediums (1 Samuel 28) and disobeyed God.

He has anointed me

And here is the 'Why?' for Jesus. This is why the Spirit of the Lord is upon him. He has been anointed. We will spend more time in what that anointing looks like over the next few weeks. Note that the Spirit of the Lord is not the anointing. They are two different things. The anointing requires the Spirit of the Lord. Without the Spirit the anointing will not be successful in fulfilling the task before it. We could think of the anointing as choosing a person for a task. We often refer to it as a call. Once a person receives the call of God on their life the Spirit of the Lord then comes and empowers them to achieve the task.

All this lays a foundation for the next part of the passage Jesus reads. Bringing good news to the poor, proclaiming release to the captives, recovery of sight to the blind and letting the oppressed go free is done within a particular context. If we forget that context and rush in with nothing but good ideas we will be doomed to failure. Ultimately the question comes down to, 'Are we anointed?'

And that brings us to that next part of the passage. Over the rest of August we are going to dig into those next four lines from the reading. What did Jesus mean when he said he had been anointed to:

Bring good news to the poor
Proclaim release to the captives
Recovery of sight to the blind
Let the oppressed go free

So this week...Bringing good news to the poor.

Wow! That raises so many questions. What was this good news? Who were the poor? What did Jesus mean when he said this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing?

Let's start with the question, 'What is this good news?' There's a bit of theology here. I don't want to get too complicated so please forgive me if you find this difficult to follow. I will try to keep it as simple as possible.

Many of us will be familiar with the answer, 'Jesus is the Good News.' Yet it is not clear from Jesus' reading of these verses and his closing sentence that he understands himself primarily as the Good News.

Looking back on the event it seems obvious to us, through the lens of the New Testament, that this is just what Jesus was saying. The fact that the God of creation breaks in on the creation in human form to redeem it is very much

good news. But for Jesus in this moment, it is not about him personally, it is about the breaking in that God is doing. It is a breaking in that has been showing up in different ways throughout the Old Testament narrative.

A lovely example of that breaking in with good news is the story of Elisha we read today. The company of prophets were poor, they lived on the handouts of others. To have a meal go bad like was a genuine disaster. Most of us would taste something that was off, throw it out and then go out for takeaways. This may have been their only meal for the day. And now it was toxic. In their words, there was death in the pot.

To give a little background to the story, even today it is common for there to be a communal cooking pot in a village. Everyone contributes whatever they collect to the pot and then share in the meal at the end of the day. One person may catch a rabbit, another collect some gourds, another some herbs or spices, and so on. There may be several kinds of meat and vegetable in the pot. Often not much of anything, but enough to give flavour and a little sustenance. If someone were to put something poisonous into the pot it is the whole village that suffers, men, women and children. That is no small thing when food is hard to come by.

So one of the prophets tastes the broth in the pot and finds it is inedible and they cry out to Elisha. For some reason known only to Elisha he asks for some flour and throws a handful into the pot. The poisons are removed. Incredibly good news for that group of people.

And it's this breaking in of good news to the poor that can get lost in our focus on Jesus. Yet strangely enough it is exactly this kind of good news to the poor that Jesus himself was talking about. The good news for the poor is a break in the cycle of toxicity that destroys and drains away life. God steps into the world and says, 'It doesn't have to be this way. There is a better way.' There is a remedy for the death in the pot.

Let me be clear here. This is a two-part remedy. One part of the remedy is spiritual. It is found in relationship with Jesus. The other part of the remedy is physical. It is found in a restoration of life and hope, economic, social, educational, political. And the two work in tandem. In fact, I would argue that you can't have one without the other. It's a little like James arguing that faith without works is dead. If we simply say, 'Repent and be saved,' and leave a person on the sidewalk without a genuine hand up, then we are not bringing good news for the poor. And if we support a person with money and friends

and education and never introduce them to Jesus, we are not bringing good news for the poor.

The good news is found in the dynamic combination of the two parts. Jesus brought the good news that God is present in the world in word and in action. He fed the hungry *and* he called them to repentance.

There were two other questions I want to explore briefly.

First, who were the poor? It seems like a strange question to ask.

Unfortunately, the church has a habit of spiritualising the obvious because the obvious often comes with a cost we don't want to pay. So rather than face the fact that the poor are the people without sufficient wealth to make their way in this world, we prevaricate and pretend that everyone is poor spiritually. The rich kid with first world problems is just as poor as the kid whose shoes have holes in them and who doesn't have lunch for school. Which is patently false. For Jesus, the poor are those who don't have enough resources to live on. Take that as you like, but it is predominantly those who have little or no money.

Secondly, what did Jesus mean when he said this scripture had been fulfilled in their hearing? Again, we could spiritualise this and say simply, 'Jesus is here, so everything will be OK.' I don't think that's what he means. I also don't think he means that the fulfilment is complete. I think he means that, here and now the process has begun. Remember, Jesus was straight up when he told the disciples that the poor would always be with them. This is a never-ending task. The anointing that Jesus has received he passes on to his disciples, just as Elijah passed his anointing on to Elisha. That same anointing is passed on to us so that we can continue to bring good news to the poor.

The question I leave you with today is, 'How are you going to bring good news to the poor?'

We Pray

God who sees us. Who sees our hearts and knows our minds. We bow before you and confess that often we are not very good at attending to the call you place on our lives. We miss out on the working of your Holy Spirit in our lives when we fail to live out your call. You continue to love us and you continue to call us and we ask you to help us to be genuine disciples who bring Good News to the poor. And while we're at it, give us eyes to see when those around us are struggling with their call, and wisdom to know how to support them. In Jesus' wonderful name. Amen.

Let the weak say, "I am strong."

Reuben Morgan

Let the weak say, "I am strong"
Let the poor say, "I am rich"
Let the blind say, "I can see"
It's what the Lord has done in me

Hosanna, hosanna
To the Lamb that was slain
Hosanna, hosanna
Jesus died and rose again

Into the river I will wade
There my sins are washed away
From the heavens' mercy streams
Of the Saviour's love for me

I will rise from waters deep
Into the saving arms of God
I will sing salvation songs
Jesus Christ has set me free

Offering

Patient and Merciful God, we hear your call to live in love as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us. Our ears hear these words in our worship; our minds know what they mean; our hearts long to follow them; but we know that tomorrow we will be tempted to slip into the familiar life where we ourselves are at the centre of our world and the needs we focus on are almost entirely our own. In our giving this day, help us strengthen our resolve to love as Christ loves us, for it is in the name of Jesus that we pray. Amen.

Prayer for Ourselves and Others

We see the church dwindling with just 2% of our nation claiming Christian faith and we look at our own inadequate responses and despair. Even when we try our hardest it seems like we meet brick walls at every turn. Be our strength where we are weak.

Make your ways known upon earth, O God,
your saving power among all peoples.

We look at ourselves and see men and women who struggle to serve you. We are slow and tired and struggle with tasks that once seemed so simple. It is so much easier to just say no and sit back waiting for someone else to do whatever it is that seems to need doing. We struggle to trust that you can do what needs to be done.

Renew your Church in holiness,
and help us to serve you with joy.

We see leaders around the world struggling to cope with the vast array of problems we face, from climate change to economic woes, challenges to nationhood and threats to life through famine and lack of fresh water. Countries remove the rights of some people and exalt the rights of others. Jealousy takes priority over justice.

Guide the leaders of this and every nation,
that justice may prevail throughout the world.

We see the poor in their multitudes and we despair of ever managing to do anything lasting for them, of ever bringing them any good news. There is so much need and we have so few resources. God you own the cattle on a thousand hills. Would you show us what we can do, and would you fill the gaps where we can't?

Let not the needy, O God, be forgotten,
nor the hope of the poor be taken away.

We see so much war around the world. War over land. War over water. War over religion. War over history. We feel powerless to make any change and yet you call us to be peacemakers.

Make us instruments of your peace,
and let your glory be over all the earth.

For ourselves, those we love, our hopes and dreams, fears and concerns
In your mercy Lord, hear our prayer.

All this in the wonderful name of our Lord Jesus who taught us how to pray...

The Lord's Prayer

Our Father in Heaven, holy be your name.

Your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as in heaven.

Give us today our daily bread.

Forgive us our sins as we forgive those who sin against us.

Save us from the time of trial and deliver us from evil.

For the kingdom, the power and the glory are yours, now and forever.

Amen

Let us talents and tongues employ

Let us talents and tongues employ,
reaching out with a shout of joy:
bread is broken, the wine is poured,
Christ is spoken and seen and heard.

Jesus lives again,
earth can breathe again,
pass the Word around:
loaves abound!

Christ is able to make us one,
at the table he set the tone,
teaching people to live to bless,
love in word and in deed express.

Jesus calls us in, sends us out
bearing fruit in a world of doubt,
gives us love to tell, bread to share:
God (Immanuel) everywhere!

Benediction and Grace

May the Grace of the Lord Jesus Christ,
the Love of God,
and the Fellowship of the Holy Spirit
be with us all, now and forevermore. Amen.