



# *Third Sunday after the Epiphany*

## *Sermon by Revd Matthew Wright*



Sunday 23 January 2021

### READINGS

Nehemiah 8:1-3,5-6,8-10; Psalm 19; 1 Corinthians 12:12-31a; Luke 4:14-21

## *The Challenges of Jesus' Ministry*

May I speak in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

This Sunday's Gospel reading from Luke records the beginning of Jesus' public ministry in Galilee, just a few short weeks after having celebrated the birth of Christ. The passage contains the well-known quote of Jesus from the book of Isaiah. And there is much we could say about this. I always like to suggest seeing this as the Jesus manifesto. And its significant, that is, the order in which Jesus lists his priorities, first of which is bringing good news to the poor.

The scholarly consensus about the phrase "the year of the Lord's favour" in verse 19 of chapter 4 is that this is a reference to the year of Jubilee (scholarship also suggests that regulations such as the year of Jubilee and the Sabbath were not implemented faithfully, if at all). So really Jesus is proposing radical action in suggesting that the year of Jubilee will be implemented.

One of the provisions made in Leviticus 25 (which details this observance) was that when the year of Jubilee occurred, any land that had been lost due to indebtedness was to be restored to its original owner. Now we know that land-indebtedness, pledging land for surety, foreclosure on one's land by temple authorities, and debt in general, were major problems at the time of Jesus. During the year of Jubilee, all debts were supposed to be cancelled and all lands lost returned to their original owners. Of course the ruling elite (which included the priestly class) owned most of this repossessed land, and so one can understand why the year of Jubilee was not implemented. Vested interests were at stake.

What I wish to focus on, however, in looking at some other details of Luke 4, are some of the challenges, some of the ups and downs, which Jesus faces as he attempts to pursue and carry out and fulfil his mandate and his ministry. The start of our Gospel reads: "Then Jesus, filled with the power of the Holy Spirit, returned to Galilee, and a report about him spread through all the surrounding country."

Firstly, it is instructive to note where Jesus returned from. Jesus returned from the desert – an aspect of Jesus' ministry which we usually focus on in Lent. He has spent forty days and nights in the desert fasting, with the wild beasts, being waited on by angels. Both Matthew and Mark indicate that it was in fact the Holy Spirit which drove Jesus to the desert, and Matthew's record says that the Holy Spirit drove Jesus to the desert so that he could be tested by the devil (Matt. 4:1).

Now, having returned from the desert in Luke 4:14, Jesus is filled with the power of the Holy Spirit. Verse 15 states that he began to teach in the synagogues of Galilee and he was praised by everyone. So at this point everyone is praising Jesus in Galilee. After entering the synagogue in Nazareth, too, we read, in verse 22, that "All spoke well of him and were amazed at the gracious words that came from his mouth." So far so good.

But then someone in the audience jibes, "Isn't that Joseph's son?" Oh dear. They have started to question Jesus' credentials and pedigree as a teacher. The truth, which everyone in Nazareth might have known, is that technically Joseph did not have a son named Jesus, Mary did. Questions around the circumstances of Jesus birth and rumours, perhaps knowledge, that Jesus was an illegitimate child would be familiar to the townsfolk there. In addition, the fact that Joseph was a carpenter would also not have stood Jesus in good stead, as tradesmen were looked down on since they did not own any land.

After citing some details from the ministry of Elijah and Elisha which suggest or imply that the people of Nazareth (perhaps Israel?) are not worthy to receive God's salvation, the Nazorean townsfolk lose it completely and attempt to publicly execute Jesus by throwing him off a cliff. Bearing in mind that this is the beginning of Jesus' public ministry, note how many obstacles he has already had to face: God offers Jesus to the devil to be tested in a way reminiscent of Job; Jesus then, empowered by the Holy Spirit, begins his Galilean ministry but falls out of favour with the townsfolk of Nazareth, to the extent that they try to kill him. And Jesus has only just started his ministry.

In our lives, brothers and sisters, as you know, we are bound to face difficulties and trials, we are bound to face setbacks and opposition, we are bound in fact to face insults and ridicule. Somehow seemingly God is in control of all of this, and may even be allowing it. If Jesus had not been rejected by his own townsfolk, would he have been compelled to go to the towns and villages of Galilee, and ultimately to Jerusalem? Let us then take heart, knowing that our Saviour has endured many of the challenges we ourselves face, and indeed worse. And that God was faithful to fulfil God's plans and purposes through these challenges.

Amen