

Sermon: Luke 4:16-21 [Isaiah 61:1-9; Jas 5:13-16a]

A few years ago, I visited Nazareth, the very town where Jesus grew up and where of course he stood up to speak in the synagogue that day we heard about in our Gospel reading. If you've been there yourself you'll know that Nazareth is a busy bustling predominantly Arab town - and in the middle of it is this enormous Christian Church. It's built right on top of the tiny old house where by ancient tradition the angel Gabriel is believed to have visited the Virgin Mary. It's a very imposing building, if you like that sort of thing. It's very churchy too: behind the high altar there's a big fresco full of bishops and cardinals.

What you see in Nazareth you see across the Holy Land. Wherever some significant event in the gospel story took place, someone has had the urge to build a Church there. It speaks of the instinct we have to want to set special events, and special people, in concrete, to institutionalise them.

But is this instinct to institutionalise right? Or to put it another way, what did Jesus come to do? Did he come to found an institution - or to start a revolution? It's an apt question for us to ask ourselves on this day when we recommit ourselves to ministry: to ministry within what many take to be a very 'institutional institution', if I can put it that way. It is certainly part of the Establishment of this country, with a capital 'E'. But did Jesus come to found an institution - or did he rather come to start a revolution? Judging by people's reactions in Nazareth it was the latter: people tend to be much more at ease with institutions than revolutions. Institutions are stabilising; revolutions are upsetting: that's why they tried to throw Jesus off a cliff at the end of this incident.

And yet at first, Jesus made a very positive first impression on them: The verses just before our reading say this: *Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.* This is, after all, the local Galilee boy made good, and nowhere was more local to him than his home town, Nazareth. Which is probably why he's given the honour of reading in the synagogue. And what he chooses to read is the passage from Isaiah, which formed, of course, our OT reading. Isaiah's words in Jesus' mouth are full of significant echoes of Israel's past – echoes which give them, ironically, sharp contemporary relevance, both for Jesus' time and ours; both for Jesus' ministry and ours. So what are those echoes?

First of all although these are the words of Isaiah, they are of course the words of the Messiah. Jesus says, *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.'* And I'm sure you don't need me to remind you that the word translated 'anointed' is directly related to the word 'Christ' which is simply the Greek word for 'Messiah', the anointed one. So when Jesus says *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has anointed me.'* he could just as well have said *'The Spirit of the Lord is upon me, because he has Messiah-ed me.'* Indeed that is what he is saying. The revolutionary agenda that Jesus is announcing is the agenda of no less a person than the Lord's Messiah; the anointed one of God; the one on whom his Spirit rests.

The second echo is an echo from the exile. Isaiah was announcing the end of exile. The captives and the oppressed, the people in need of saving, of whom he speaks were the exiles in Babylon. Of course those captives had eventually come home. And yet to many in Jesus' day the exile was still continuing. Yes, they were back in the land, but no, they were not free, not while they were subject to Roman rule. Judea was

perhaps the most rebellious of all Roman provinces, because the people of Israel were still longing for the end of exile and were not afraid to take direct action to bring the exile to an end.

And the third echo points us back beyond the exile, beyond Isaiah, way back to Leviticus and the rules for the year of Jubilee, that year when debts would be cancelled and slaves released. The year of Jubilee – ‘*the year of the Lord’s favour*’ in Isaiah’s words remained a powerful symbol to the people in Jesus’ day. The first thing the rebels did in the Jewish War in AD66 was to burn the Treasury where the records of debt were kept. It wasn’t just an act of vandalism: they saw their actions as being all of a piece with the year of Jubilee - the year of liberation. It was a sign of liberation. It was a sign of *revolution*.

So when Jesus reads out these words these ideas crowd together - of release for the captives and cancellation of debts; of the end of exile; and of the coming of the Messiah. And then Jesus says, v. 21 “*Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.*” And that is actually his sermon – just those eight words. The shortest sermon in scripture – and rather shorter I’m afraid than this one. Jesus sits down to say that, because in the synagogue whilst you stood to read you sat to preach. That is his very short sermon. But it is packed full of meaning. Jesus takes these three powerful ideas from the past and focuses them on the present; he focuses them, in fact, on himself. When he read the words, ‘*The Spirit of the Lord is upon me*’ he wasn’t reading Isaiah’s words, so much as reading a script prepared for him centuries before. He’s the one to whom Isaiah was referring. Without a shadow of a doubt Jesus is saying that he is the Messiah; through him the exile will end and the year of Jubilee will come. He is saying without a doubt that he is the one they’ve been waiting for; he is the one through whom God’s revolution is going to come.

Now that's pretty revolutionary disturbing stuff, and yet initially at least Jesus' hearers greet what he says very positively. Why such a positive reaction, when later they want to throw him off the cliff? Perhaps they were in the market for revolution - as long as it was a revolution on their own terms, one that overturned others, rather than themselves. When they heard Jesus speak they saw themselves as the poor, as the captives, as the blind, as the oppressed. In other words what Jesus had to say was - they thought - good news for them: they were going to gain from this revolution that he would bring.

So, as I'm sure you'll remember from what follows, Jesus goes out of his way to win not their approval, but their *disapproval*, and their downright hostility. First he draws a contrast between Nazareth, up in the hill country of Galilee, and Capernaum, down by the lake. Capernaum, he says, is a place where miracles are likely to happen. But Nazareth is not. It's hardly a favourable comparison. He's deliberately insulting the city that had raised him.

But secondly he goes on to draw an even more unfavourable comparison, not between two Jewish towns, but between Jews and Gentiles. He deliberately takes two OT stories in which God's favour is focused not on his own people, but on people right outside the covenant, on despised Gentiles, on the widow from Zarephath in Lebanon, and on Naaman the Syrian.

Why does Jesus draw attention to these stories? He does so surely to challenge, indeed to revolutionise his hearers' assumptions. He raises the question of who this revolution he's just announced is *for*, of whose side he is on. Jesus is deliberately overturning, revolutionising indeed, the positive first impressions of

those listening to him. His revolution is *not* for the people they expect it's for - it's not in other words for *them*. He's saying that it's other people, not them, who are the focus of God's love, care and attention.

Given all that, it's hardly surprising that the crowd reacts as they do and try to throw him off the cliff. The crowd turn the tables on Jesus, because he's turned the tables completely on them. He's revolutionised and turned upside down their ideas of the revolution that God's Messiah is going to bring. And he's tried to turn upside down their view of themselves, but they just won't have it.

And we too must recognise that Jesus good news is truly revolutionary, and resist every temptation to institutionalise and domesticate it or recruit it to our own purposes or causes. It turns people and communities upside down, it turns expectations upside down, it comforts the disturbed yes, but it also disturbs the comfortable. The gospel of Jesus Christ is good news but it's only really good news if first we recognise that it's rather bad news, that it's disturbing; that it's revolutionary. That's what people in Nazareth couldn't cope with. We need to ask whether we can.

The ministry that Jesus calls us to is a revolutionary thing. But if we are to participate in that ministry then first of all we must be revolutionised ourselves – and go on being so. If we are to be those through whom good news is preached to the poor; through whom release is proclaimed to the captives; through whom the blind recover their sight; the oppressed are set free and through whom the year of the Lord's favour is proclaimed, then each and every day we have to acknowledge that we ourselves are poor, captive, blind, oppressed and sorely in need of the Lord's favour. Each and every day we must seek the anointing that

the Lord our God alone can give us if we are to be in any sense fruitful in the task to which he calls us. And it is that blessing of course that we seek afresh in this service today.

And furthermore we must recognise that there is a *givenness* to this ministry to which we are called. We are anointed by the Spirit, just as Jesus was for *this* purpose, and indeed I would add for no other. Of course there is something intensely personal about the ministry to which God calls each and every one of us: we have a multiplicity of gifts and a multiplicity of callings; no two ministries are alike any more than any two of us are alike. But nonetheless there must at root and at core be an intense Christ-likeness about the ministry we exercise. We are called to shape our lives and our ministries according to the calling and according to the reality of who Jesus Christ is. We are not to seek to remake him in our own image, and to recruit him to our cause. I remember John Habgood, who died just recently, saying at his enthronement as Archbishop of York, that if we choose to believe only what we want to believe then we end up believing only in ourselves. And I'm sure he's right. There is a givenness about Christian faith to which we are called to give ourselves. And there is a givenness about Christian ministry to which we are also called to give ourselves. If our ministry speaks more about who we are than about who he is then we have to ask whether it is true ministry at all. Jesus set aside his own will to follow his Father's will. And he calls us to do no less.

So we need to ensure there is an authentic Christlikeness, something indeed truly messianic about our ministry; that we seek day by day the Spirit's anointing, that we proclaim faithfully that in Christ the Exile is over, that in him we can be truly at home and at peace; that we announce with conviction in Word and

Sacrament that in him the long awaited year of Jubilee, the long awaited year of liberation has finally come. And if we are to do all that authentically then we must know ourselves first and foremost as those whom he has liberated; as those who are truly at home and at peace in the Father's house; as those who have been anointed for ministry by the Spirit. We must know ourselves in those terms so that in us, both individually and together, the character and reality of Christ may truly be seen.

And there's another reason why any ministry we have must be intensely Christ-like. We only exercise any ministry because Jesus did first. In Luke 4 Jesus focuses Isaiah's prophetic words exclusively on himself. And in one way they can only apply to him. He alone is the anointed one of God on whom the Spirit rests: he is the only Son of the Father. Through him alone these words can come true. And yet... and yet... Because of everything that Jesus has done for us those words become true for us as well. Because of his victory on the cross, a victory he alone could win; because of the triumph of his resurrection, a triumph he alone could claim; because of his gift at Pentecost, a gift that was his alone to give – because of all that he has accomplished those words come to apply to us too, as we too, as those who follow him in mission and in ministry, are anointed by the Spirit, to do the very works that Jesus did, in the power of his Spirit.

We are anointed by the Holy Spirit, chosen by the Spirit, 'messiah-ed' by the Spirit - just as Jesus was, to do just what Jesus did, because of all that he has done. So we too are to preach good news to the poor; we too are to proclaim freedom for the prisoners and recovery of sight for the blind; we too are to release the oppressed, and to proclaim the year of the Lord's favour – and we too are to declare the revolution of God that he has made real in Jesus Christ. Because of Jesus, and by his Spirit, his mission

becomes our mission too. But there is nothing automatic about this. His ministry only becomes ours in as much as we depend up on him. And in that light can I encourage you all to engage in the Thy Kingdom Come initiative this year - and to engage in the radical exercise of depending upon our God to bring in his Kingdom at the heart of that initiative – and which is surely at the heart of all ministry [resources].

So yes, there is something immensely challenging in all this. To engage in ministry is to follow Jesus faithfully, depending upon him, in the way of sacrifice and service, praying 'your Kingdom come, your, not my will, be done. It is, as we'll remember tonight, to take a towel, kneel and wash dirty feet. It is, as we'll remember tomorrow, to take up our cross and to follow him. Ministry is not a calling for the fainthearted.

And yet it is the most joyful and glorious thing imaginable. For our God is indeed bringing in his Kingdom. We are Easter people not only because Jesus died for us, but because he rose again and lives for us. We are Easter people because in the end nothing, not even death, can stop the in-breaking of his Kingdom. This is in the end an irresistible revolution into which we are caught up, and which we are called to serve. And what greater privilege could there possibly be than to be agents under God of bringing good news to the poor, of proclaiming release to the captives and recovery of sight to the blind, of letting the oppressed go free and proclaiming the year of the Lord's favour. What a happy and joyful calling is ours. We have been anointed to anoint; served so we may serve; blessed so we may bless and loved so we may love. My brothers and sisters let us be renewed in obedience to that calling; let us rejoice afresh in that calling, that the Kingdom of God, the revolution of God, may come here on earth as it is heaven, to the glory of his holy name. Amen.