

The Church's prayer for Sunday 23rd January

Loving God, through your Son,
you have called us to repent of our sin,
to believe the good news,
and to celebrate the coming of your kingdom.
Grant that we may hear the call to discipleship
and gladly proclaim the gospel to a waiting world,
through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Bible Readings and Reflection for Sunday 23rd January

A reading from Nehemiah 8:1-3, 5-6, 8-10

¹ all the people came together as one in the square before the Water Gate. They told Ezra the teacher of the Law to bring out the Book of the Law of Moses, which the LORD had commanded for Israel.

² So on the first day of the seventh month Ezra the priest brought the Law before the assembly, which was made up of men and women and all who were able to understand.

³ He read it aloud from daybreak till noon as he faced the square before the Water Gate in the presence of the men, women and others who could understand. And all the people listened attentively to the Book of the Law.

⁵ Ezra opened the book. All the people could see him because he was standing above them; and as he opened it, the people all stood up. ⁶ Ezra praised the LORD, the great God; and all the people lifted their hands and responded, "Amen! Amen!" Then they bowed down and worshiped the LORD with their faces to the ground.

⁸ They read from the Book of the Law of God, making it clear and giving the meaning so that the people understood what was being read.

⁹ Then Nehemiah the governor, Ezra the priest and teacher of the Law, and the Levites who were instructing the people said to them all, "This day is holy to the LORD your God. Do not mourn or weep." For all the people had been weeping as they listened to the words of the Law.

¹⁰ Nehemiah said, "Go and enjoy choice food and sweet drinks, and send some to those who have nothing prepared. This day is holy to our Lord. Do not grieve, for the joy of the LORD is your strength."

A Gospel reading from Luke 4:14-21

¹⁴ Jesus returned to Galilee in the power of the Spirit, and news about him spread through the whole countryside. ¹⁵ He was teaching in their synagogues, and everyone praised him.

¹⁶ He went to Nazareth, where he had been brought up, and on the Sabbath day he went into the synagogue, as was his custom. He stood up to read, ¹⁷ and the scroll of the prophet Isaiah was handed to him. Unrolling it, he found the place where it is written:



¹⁸ “The Spirit of the Lord is on me,
because he has anointed me
to proclaim good news to the poor.
He has sent me to proclaim freedom for the prisoners
and recovery of sight for the blind,
to set the oppressed free,
¹⁹ to proclaim the year of the Lord’s favour.”

²⁰ Then he rolled up the scroll, gave it back to the attendant and sat down. The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him. ²¹ He began by saying to them, “Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.”

A reflection from Revd Robert Dolman

One way to begin your weekday mornings and to spice up your Weetabix is to turn on the Today programme on Radio 4. It began life in a modest way as a twenty-minute slot in 1957, but has developed into a major BBC news programme. It deals with topical controversies, has probing, sometimes quite aggressive, grilling interviews with leading politicians and other framers of our thinking, and provides its audience with up-to-date information and comment on national and international news. One of the programme’s presenters said, ‘If you want to drop a word in the ear of the nation, then this is the way to do it.’

Why begin this morning with the Today programme? Well, in St Luke’s Gospel the very first word of his own that Jesus is recorded as saying is Today and that word is spoken as he outlines his programme for his ministry. It happened like this. It was the custom in synagogue worship, after prayers and a portion from the Law of Moses, for a member of the congregation to read a passage from the prophets, and then sit and expound it. Jesus was probably already known as a preacher in the villages of Galilee, and it would be natural for him to be invited to do this. So, on a sabbath day in the synagogue at his own town of Nazareth, Jesus unfolded a scroll, read a passage from the prophet Isaiah and boldly proclaimed, ‘Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing.’

The preacher, the politician, anyone wanting to be heard, tries to be in tune with the immediate needs of their audience. Earlier this month the leader of the Labour Party, Sir Keir Starmer, said, ‘Today I want to introduce my contract with the British people.’ And he proceeded to share his own political vision.

In similar vein Luke portrays Jesus producing his own programme for his ministry at the onset of his public life. To use a modern idiom, Jesus says, ‘This is where I am coming from.’ Or, ‘This is my manifesto.’

Where did he get it from? He did not live as we do in a world knee deep in paper and overloaded with information and statistics. I do not suppose Jesus had ever read a lot else beyond the pages of what became the Hebrew Bible. Perhaps his mind was all the clearer and more focused as a result. Through his deep pondering on them, the scriptures had become part of the fabric of his mind. They were giving him a growing sense of his personal identity and shaping his life’s work and his destiny. He must have known a lot of stirring



passages by heart, and he was inevitably drawn to the great trumpeting and drumbeating passages of the prophet Isaiah.

The main thrust of what he read is a prophecy that after their exile in Babylon, round about six centuries before the time of Jesus, the Jewish people would once again be free to return to Jerusalem and celebrate the jubilee year, the year of the Lord's favour. The Jews were still looking forward to this new age when God would bring freedom and salvation in all its fullness.

'Today in your very hearing this text has come true,' is the summary of what Jesus says. It is a short but prodigious and explosive claim about himself and his message. People were transfixed as they hung on the gracious, powerful words of a local boy, the son of Joseph.

So, what was Jesus claiming? He was saying that what Isaiah saw long ago through the mists of time, was now finally real and present in himself and his good news of the Kingdom. He himself is good news for the poor and the marginalized. The bonds that have oppressed and fettered God's people are to be broken. The Jubilee according to which every fifty years liberty was to be proclaimed throughout the land was now present in its fullness.

The ministry of Jesus recorded in the Gospels is an enacted commentary on this opening promise. At his baptism Jesus was anointed and empowered by the Spirit. His message was inclusive; it constantly, decisively and for some shockingly, broke down traditional barriers. He welcomed into his fellowship those who were despised by the self-satisfied and respectable: he ate and drank with publicans and sinners; he numbered women among his close friends. He recommended detachment from the accumulation of possessions, from the grasping and clutching of personal wealth. It was the poor and needy, those who came to God humbly with empty hands who were able to receive his generous blessings and to share them with others. The rich meanwhile were in great spiritual danger; a good deal of scholarship on the parables of Jesus in recent years has shown how they were precisely addressed to the social and economic issues of the day and how cutting and critical they must have sounded to those in power.

Jesus also pronounced good news for those who were prisoners. Some he believed were held in captivity by forces of evil. These included the physically sick and the mentally ill and those in spiritual torment, as well as those bearing the burden of their past sins, desperate for forgiveness and the healing of memories. They flocked to him and his ministry was one of deliverance and freedom, enabling them to walk tall, to leap for joy, to see afresh with wonder and excitement, to be led out of the blackness of the slough of despond and out of the isolation of madness and the squalor of sin and to enjoy a fullness of life they had previously been denied.

It was an electrifying ministry. But what if we recycle this passage from Isaiah which Jesus had made his own and see what it has to say to us in the world of the Today programme. Does it shed light on what members of the Body of Christ are supposed to be and do?

Here are three out of many points that could be made. The first is that the Church is a community anointed by the Spirit with a programme for now. It is of course true that we are



conscious of the past and its value. We are proud of All Our Yesterdays. We draw insights and inspiration from the Church in previous ages, we rejoice in the communion of saints, their winsome words, their pioneering deeds and their healing love which embraced a broken and weary world. We also look forward with hope and expectation to Tomorrow's World. We have an exciting vision of the future, both in this life and beyond, which fills us with hope and joy.

But when we awake in the morning it is the Today programme that demands our attention. We do not escape into the nostalgic glories of the past or become other-worldly in our hopes and aspirations. Our ministry is in the here and now. And it finds its power and its direction in the Spirit of God.

This is where the Church differs from a political party. Although religion is properly concerned with political issues, the mainspring of its work is not found in political theory or dogma but in the guiding of the Spirit as we find that revealed in the common worship and life of the Church especially in its worship and prayer and its listening to the Scriptures. We should not be apologetic about those things that make us distinctively Christian.

The second point is that the Church is a community founded on the experience of forgiveness. Forgiveness is an aspect of the release from captivity of which Isaiah wrote. Forgiveness liberates us from the shackles of fear and shame. This is fundamental to the Church's life. It is there at the beginning. Would not Peter who had betrayed the Lord Jesus three times be terrified of meeting him after the Resurrection? Would he not have expected punishment and retribution? Yet he is entrusted with leadership in the Church, and a central role in the pastoral ministry of feeding the lambs and tending the sheep. And would not Paul, who had eagerly persecuted the Church of God have expected a day of reckoning when he met the risen Lord on the road to Damascus? But by amazing grace he is entrusted with a commission of commending Jesus as Saviour to the whole Gentile world.

The name Winston Place will be remembered only by the keenest of cricket fans. He was a batsman in the years after the war, playing for Lancashire and three times for England. When he retired he became a county cricket umpire, but this lasted for only a short time. He was a kindly man and a commentator wrote that he found it too distressing to give batsmen out and added God is rather like Winston Place. The point is that God is not punitive, longing to catch us out and make us pay. His desire is to restore relationships between us and himself and amongst ourselves too. Forgiveness, breaking the vicious circle of revenge needs to be the life blood of the Church as an example to the world. That is why only this month the President of the Methodist Conference asked Methodists who disagreed on big issues to be less angry and cross and unforgiving and unloving in speaking and writing. She pleaded for a gentler discourse; before you open your mouth, just say, 'How would I want to be spoken to?' The ministry of the Church is about the mediation of forgiveness and the making of new starts

The third point is the centrality of freedom to the Christian message. Liberation from slavery and various kinds of tyranny has been a recurrent theme in the Today programme across the years. The great oratory of Martin Luther King witnessed to the God who liberated the people of Israel from Egypt and the God in Jesus Christ who sets his people free from their



sins, and with power and clarity related this to the situation of people of colour in the United States. The life and ministry of Archbishop Desmond Tutu, deeply rooted in Jesus Christ, were dedicated to the freedom and human dignity of all South Africans and the creation of a new society. He stood waving a Bible in his hand and declared, 'Apartheid is dead.'

Each Church community needs to be an environment where, through acceptance and love, people can find deliverance from their own past and become free and confident to grow into their true selves. We perhaps underestimate the number of people who are trapped in fear and failure and long to be set free. Some are haunted and dominated by ghosts from the past whose continuing stranglehold over their hearts and minds needs to be broken. Some are trapped in a cycle of poverty which is both material and spiritual and they too long to be set free. Some are consumed by a spirit of hatred and vengefulness which saps their energies and prevents their unfettered movement.

To us all Jesus Christ comes with the energy of the Spirit, the word of forgiveness and the gift of liberation. It is the programme of the Church today to make this real and effective.