

I can remember about 7 years ago I was preaching in a church, and I was conscious that a well known retired minister was in the congregation. After the service I was very keen to know what he thought of my preaching. So I remember having the conversation any with him on what improvements I could make to my preaching. The elderly man, in a very gentle way, told me that there was nothing wrong with my preaching, but that I had used the wrong readings from the lectionary. You see every week there are set readings that can be used for worship – in fact there's set readings for every day. And I had picked the previous week's reading.

The practice of set readings was something that Jesus would have been used to within his Jewish culture, but scholars suggest that the reading from Isaiah that Jesus used in the synagogue was unlikely to be the set reading for the day (don't ask me how they know that). So I obviously am in good company. You see the set readings were called the Haftarah – they began by reading a section of the Torah – the books of the law, and then it would have been followed by a reading from the books of the Prophets. But scholars suggest that Jesus wanted to choose a reading that was going to make an impact on the crowd.

To understand things fully from this passage, remember that the synagogue was a different place to the Temple. The synagogue was a place for teaching, whereas the temple was a place for priests to offer sacrifice to God. In the synagogues, each man had the opportunity to participate in the times of reading and learning. A man could volunteer to read a passage from the scrolls, and then afterwards, he would sit down and explain what those passages he had read meant to him. And this is exactly what Jesus was doing. These folks in the synagogue were totally captivated by the teaching of Jesus. Verse 21 says 'The eyes of everyone in the synagogue were fastened on him'.

This was, in terms of Luke's account, Jesus' inaugural sermon of his ministry, and it becomes even more significant when he chooses Isaiah, and declares that the Spirit of the Lord is on me, because he has anointed me to preach good news to the poor. And then to make things absolutely clear, he sits down, and then says "Today this scripture is fulfilled in your hearing". Jesus is saying, today he has fulfilled this scripture, today he is God's salvation to the world. God's promise of freedom has come to his people.

What Jesus did that day, at the start of his ministry, was in essence to provide his Mission Statement as the Messiah. Now I realise that buzz words like Vision and Strategy and Mission Statements are very much the language of the Corporations in the big bad world, but it is something more and more we are hearing in our church communities to communicate their purpose. That's why we have our 5 values to underpin everything we do – pastoring, deepening, shaping, reaching and partnering. And so Jesus was saying, "Those words of Isaiah that I just read out to you - This is why I am here. This is my mission".

The Jews listening would have known exactly what it meant. It may well have caused them to catch their breaths, because they knew Isaiah's prophecy, and they knew two things:

(1) they knew those words applied to the Messiah, and

(2) they referred to the year of Jubilee.

We know there is a Jubilee coming up this year but let me explain the biblical jubilee. You see, the Jews had a custom, ordained by God, that not only would every 7th day of the week be a sabbath, a day of rest, but that every 7th year would also be a sabbath, when the

land would not be farmed. And after every 7th sabbath year ( 7 times 7 = 49) (that is, every 50th year) there would be what was called the “year of Jubilee.” And in that year, all slaves would be set free, all debts would be cancelled. And so Jesus was using this text to say he had come to fulfill this, that this was his mission statement, but not just every 50 years but every day for everyone. That he had come to speak good news to the poor, to bring freedom to the captives, healing to the brokenhearted, it would speak forgiveness for the guilty, it would bring deliverance, laughter, relief, joy, JUBILEE!

But too often we, the disciples of Jesus, even if we acknowledge that his mission was to “bring good news to the poor, proclaim freedom for the prisoner etc”, we can instead focus and plan for the programmes or the big community events as if that’s what the mission of the Church is. So if Jesus was very clear on his mission, are we?

At the start of this new year, I have been so conscious of the gap we all have had in a normal way of living for almost 2 years. We have many people who are finding it hard to open up the shutters again and get back to life as it was 2 years ago. It doesn’t matter how many events we offer as a church, it really doesn’t matter how busy we are, we have got to be people who are willing to take the time and invest in relationship. We can have all our core values, but unless we know people, I mean really know people, then our values mean nothing. You see when Jesus spoke, it just wasn’t words, more followed. He would bring every word to fulfilment. A few chapters on from our reading, in Chapter 7, John the Baptist enquires whether Jesus is who everyone says he is. And Jesus could have quite easily said yes. But instead Jesus sends back word to John referring to his mission statement. He says, “Go back and report what you have seen and heard; the blind receive sight, the lame walk, the dead are raised, and the good news is preached to the poor”

Do you see what Jesus said to John. He was showing that it’s not just about a set of words, but there needs to be a fulfillment from it. And so I believe we need to do the same . We need more than words – we need a demonstration of our faith. If Jesus’ mission was all about people, then I’m guessing that that should become the focus of everything we do. That we are here as a refuge for those who are in need, that we can demonstrate how we as a people are getting outside the safe havens of our church and reaching out to people in our communities.

You know in this past two weeks I have met with people in our church family who many of you will know. And in those visits, as I asked more specific questions about how they were really doing, I found out just how important it is for all of us in this next year to invest time with people. Parishioners around us are lonely, they’re worried, they’re missing seeing people. For each of us we have a mission once we leave here to even consider one person in our church family who needs a call. We can sing all the songs, say all the liturgy, but Jesus calls us to put our words into action.

Last week I prepared a letter outlining what I believe our focus as a church should be as we come out of COVID. If you haven’t received a copy by email please take a copy and read. But more than read, like Jesus, let us be people who fulfil our words in action. This is a year not for fancy programmes but a year to build people up, and to take the words that we write and really really put them into action. To fulfil what God wants us to be, getting close to the individual encouraging them, supporting them, equipping them.